Il Faut Souffrir Pour Être Beau

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Il Faut Souffrir Pour Être Beau

by The_Clever_Magpie (Metal_mako_dragon)

Summary

Because for Will Graham it was not about choosing to suffer, but suffering through a choice. He just wasn't sure, as he poured the painfully green Agent Starling a bitter cup of black coffee in his Florida kitchenette, whether this particular choice would be painful or affirming.

"And what exactly makes you think I'll be any help?" he asked.

"Because you know him better than anyone," she said, sipping politely, "and because, personally, I think you're the reason he ran in the first place."

He'd give her points for creativity, but as far as he was concerned she had a lot to learn about the inner workings and desires of Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

AU Omega-verse. Will&Hannibal previous marriage, child.

Notes

Title translation: 'One Must Suffer to be Beautiful'

I started this idea a long time ago, on the inspiration of a comment on another of my stories asking for an mpreg. Now, this is not something I have ever entertained and I was entirely unsure about, as I start my stories with a short idea of a plot and then build from there, not generally about one aspect of a character such as that. However, as I have never written something like this before I was intrigued to try, and then the more I thought it through, this story took shape.

It's not a particularly nice story but then the title should give that away. And, of course, in the words of the late, great JRR Tolkein, 'things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling'.

Prologue

Chapter Summary

> If you would prefer to listen to this work dramatised by a very talented person, consider listening to this fic in podfic form acted by Dr_Fumbles_McStupid at the following link: https://archiveofourown.org/works/50956840/chapters/128736775#workskin - Chapters 1-9 are currently available.

"Cream."

"*Yellow*."

"Cream is a calming neutral."

"You want a neutral? Then pick white. I'm not having cream, it's sickly. I want yellow. Like lily pollen."

"White is clinical. I am sure I have enough of white at work."

"Well then, yellow should give you a break."

To see his husband smile, even when tinged with resignation, always gave Will Graham a subtle feeling of triumph. Hands on his hips, he surveyed the empty room before him, pale blue carpet needing replaced, one large, bright window without curtains; it was a wonderfully blank slate he couldn't wait to fill. Hannibal Lecter, half way out of his light summer jacket, seemed to pause thoughtfully. Will watched the play of minute emotions on his face, *irritation, affection, acceptance.* Will smiled and ducked his head to laugh.

"I dislike arguing with you," Hannibal said eventually, jacket draped elegantly over his left arm.

"Because you always lose?"

"That may be the case."

"Hey, you're the one who proposed. You've got no one to blame but yourself."

"Then I must remember to thank myself later," Hannibal slipped his free arm around Will's waist, drawing him near enough to kiss.

He tasted of bitter coffee with a hint of caramel; *hospital cafeteria cappuccino.* He knew Hannibal hated them, but couldn't get through the day without at least one. Will decided to turn the innocent kiss into something deeper. His rabid hormones were driving him crazy but

he found it easier to obey them than fight against them. Hannibal, thankfully, appeared to be unable to resist the temptation to indulge him. The other arm lifted up to join the first, linked across the small of his back to pull Will close. A sudden intensity blazed across the backs of his eyelids, hot and fresh and debauched. Will moaned, breaking the kiss and pushing his face into the crook of Hannibal's neck. He inhaled deeply, savouring the heady scent of musk.

He could feel the pounding of a heart against his chest and knew it was not his own. For a rare moment, Will allowed himself to be content. When he pulled back and turned to face the room once more, Hannibal slid behind him, wrapping his arms around Will's middle to place his hands protectively over his abdomen. *As if to hold the budding life there dearly.* Will closed his eyes and unconsciously leaned back against his sturdy weight, fingers finding the others and stroking gently over them in a rhythmic fashion.

"So. Yellow."

A puff of incredulous but amused breath ghosted by his ear, "You are tenacious."

"I prefer practical. And anyway, it's gender neutral. We won't have to worry about stereotyping."

"I believe she will like yellow."

"You're still convinced it's a girl?" Will shook his head gently.

"I am. You have not made up your mind?"

"I want it to be a surprise."

"How unlike you."

"Well, there's a first time for everything. At least this surprise will be good either way," Will half turned in the embrace, "God, you just got home and look at me, dragging you up here. Hungry?"

"Mmm, but it can wait."

"I'll get you something. You cook lousy on an empty stomach."

"I believe that was an insult," Hannibal said as Will disentangled himself and made for the stairs.

"Yeah, but lousy for you is still a hundred times better than anyone else, so take it as a backhanded compliment."

Hannibal's laugh followed him down the stairs and into the kitchen. The evening was stretching on, throwing a bright, golden western glow onto the walls and shadows into the corners. Will turned on the lights and ran his hand over the granite counter as he passed, savouring the smooth chill against his fingers. In the fridge he decided to be impulsive and began pulling out the things he would have liked: thin proscutto, loosely tied rocket and some

delicious dressing Hannibal had concocted the day before. While looking for something else to toss into a sandwich Will's stomach rumbled.

"Christ, now *I'm* hungry," he muttered to himself as he listened to footsteps on the stairs.

"You did not have lunch?" Hannibal asked as he entered the kitchen, undoing his tie with one hand as he hung up his jacket with the other; when Will didn't answer Hannibal sighed softly, "Must I scold you every day?"

"I was working," Will shrugged, "I forgot. I'll have something now, alright?"

"Not particularly."

"Look, I'll not make a habit of it, ok?" he said as he grabbed some goats cheese and stood, putting it next to his ingredients on the counter, "I was just focused on writing earlier and then I started thinking about decorating and I got carried away."

"A little close to the deadline to still be writing," Hannibal still sounded sore, and Will knew he was simply picking a new, contentious topic rather than continuing to harp on Will's unhealthy eating habits.

"Actually it's all finished and sent," Will raised his hands, palms up, "you know how I hate to work up to the deadline. Anyway, Harris said it's not even a sure thing it'll be published."

"Nonsense," Hannibal rebuffed Will's fears, adding "ah, there are golden tomatoes in the bottom drawer," Will ducked back down to the fridge to fetch them, "they would be fools to decline. It is a seminal work."

"Sycophant," Will smirked, pulling a loaf of fresh bread from the breadbin as the phone began to ring.

"Allow me," Hannibal said, pulling out a bread knife.

The phone in the hall rang shrilly two more times before Will picked up, stubbing his toe on the skirting board in his hurry.

"Ah, *dammit*," he couldn't stop himself from cursing into the receiver.

"Will?"

"Sorry, I...hello?" the line crackled with interference.

"..ill? Is th.."

"Sorry, I can't make you out. Can you call back? Hello?"

The line rang dead and Will sighed, replacing the receiver and reaching down to rub agitatedly at his toe. The smell of zesty fruit and herbs greeted him as he walked back into the kitchen. Will leaned in the doorway and smiled at the domestic scene before him. He liked to watch Hannibal cook. The man's hands were dextrous instruments, one minute saving lives

in the operating theatre, next preparing some exotic amouse bouche with a critical eye. There was something definitively sensual about how his hands moved, fingers twisting around the tomatoes, holding them pertly as they were slit, the effortless concentration in his keen eyes as he laid the rocket out in neat rows upon perfectly sliced brown bread.

He remembered the first time Hannibal had cooked for him, he had felt embarrassed watching the man slice olives. From awkward beginnings, Will thought with a small laugh. The sound drew Hannibal's gaze.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Don't know," Will shrugged, "bad line. They cut out. I'm sure they'll call back if it's important. Anyway, when you came in you said you had something to tell me?"

"Ah, of course, how remiss of me..." Hannibal was cut off once more by the shrill phone.

"Guess it must be something important after all," Will said with humour, "give me a minute."

This time the line was clear, though the echoing quality and the background noise told Will the caller was outside and moving. He prepared himself to be cut off again at any second, "Hello?"

"Will? Is that you?"

"Yes," Will half recognised the voice but the line was noisy with passing cars and ruffling wind, "who is this?"

"Listen to me, it's Jack," the wind died down and Will found himself shocked by the realisation of who was on the other end of the line; he paused, "can you hear me? Will?"

"Yeah, I can hear you," Will shook himself out of his stupor and couldn't help but become indignant; Jack Crawford, the man who never let go of the bone once he had it in his jaws. Weeks now he'd been badgering Will to come back to the team, always with a rough edge and terse compromise. Will had made it plain several times that profiling wasn't part of his life any longer. Worst of all he knew that, before Hannibal, he would have given in, let Jack drag him back into that world. The world that nearly broke him, put him in the asylum for a month, set him up in hospital four times with broken bones and gunshot wounds. Now, at least he felt he had the confidence to refuse.

"Good, ok, look..." Crawford started, sounding agitated and stressed.

"No, Jack, you look. You can't keep hounding me about this job, alright? I said no and I damn well mean it."

"That isn't the point I'm..."

"For god's sakes just give it a rest!" Will burst, feeling suddenly furious, "Can't you just let me be, alright? I'm happy, we're happy. We're...we're having a kid, ok? I can't come back. I just can't."

“You’re...” Will realised Crawford had barely finished a sentence since the phone call started.

“Yeah,” Will said, a little calmer, feeling suddenly embarrassed at his outburst, “I’m...yeah. Look, I’m flattered, ok? But this has got to stop.”

“God, you’re...” he thought he heard Crawford say, “I need you to listen to me.”

“I told you Alana Bloom is more capable than me any day if you just a need a perspective on this guy.”

“Jesus, Will, that’s not why I’m calling...”

“Goodbye Jack.”

He hung up with a decisive click, mirroring the sound of someone closing their car door outside. The kitchen was empty when he returned. He followed the well trod path through the opposite door out and down into the dining room, finding Hannibal at the table by the French windows. The room was warm with evening sun and the crimson lilies in the vase on the mantelpiece perfumed the air. Will sat at the place Hannibal had set for him and bit into his sandwich hungrily.

“Not someone you were expecting?”

“You won’t like it,” Will warned, wiping his mouth on the napkin by his plate.

“Jack Crawford is certainly persistent if nothing else,” Hannibal said coolly.

“You heard then,” Will said after swallowing, sitting back and rubbing at his eyes, “I turned him down. Don’t know how many more times I’ll have to but it’s always going to be the same answer.”

“Perhaps I should pay him a visit.”

“I’d rather not have anyone sent to the hospital,” Will said wryly, “and I know your levels are all over the place since I tested positive. Having to deal with my hormones is bad enough, never mind yours. I really don’t think rampaging through Quantico to beat up a department head is such a hot idea.”

“You are always so very...” Hannibal paused, frowning as he looked to the stairs; when he did not speak Will followed his stare and found nothing.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal shook his head, smoothing out his frown as he turned back to Will, “all I am saying is that sometimes men such as Crawford prefer to be told no by their own kind.”

“Oh here we go,” Will said deprecatingly, shaking his head.

“It is a simple fact, I am not demeaning you.”

“So the big bad alpha of the BAU can’t stand the idea of me telling him no? He needs you to do it for me, huh?”

It was an argument as old as their relationship, if not older. Will had taken the same umbrage with his father, always forced to be deferential to his alpha parent in all decisions. A small part of him, which he was never sure if he resented or not, had almost been relieved when his father had died. Will had been left free to follow his own life, to be his own man, not tied down by the trappings of society.

Then he’d met Dr. Hannibal Lecter and the world had tipped one hundred and eighty. He was sure no one was more surprised than he was when Hannibal began obviously courting him. Even his colleagues at Quantico had been bemused. Of course bemused was preferable to outright malice, which was all he had received from Hannibal’s family. He had always known that Hannibal was, to put it bluntly, out of Will’s league. Born to a noble and powerful family of lawyers, politicians and ambassadors, raised and bred to be successful and carry on the family lineage.

And he’d ended up marrying lowly omega Will Graham, who lived in a cottage in the woods and was infamous in his field for being mentally unstable. Infamous for flaunting the rules of society, for striking his own path as a single omega with no intentions of bonding. Even when Hannibal had proposed, Will hadn’t been able to help feeling affronted.

“No husband of mine will be caught dead in corduroy.”

Standing in King’s tailors on Guilford Road as he was measured for a jacket, Will had instinctually snapped out the retort, “*Well more fool him for saying yes to you*” before he’d realised the significance of Hannibal’s words. After five months of awkward courtship, slowly leaning towards acceptance, bitterly tinged by his inability to supplicate himself before another’s will, he’d begun to think this was never going anywhere. In fact he’d been unsure at the time that he’d even wanted it to go anywhere at all. Then he’d been dragged out to the tailors on Hannibal’s insistence, to be dressed for one of Hannibal’s many gatherings. It had put him in a foul mood.

When Hannibal’s words had finally sunk in he’d been unable to think of anything clever to say.

“I see I have finally stolen your tongue,” Hannibal had said, a subtle quirk to his lips, “*although I hope not so much that you cannot say...”*

“Yes.”

Even Hannibal had seemed momentarily taken aback by Will’s sudden approval. Will wasn’t even sure where the answer had come from, other than it had been a knee jerk reaction to the idea of being with Hannibal for the rest of his life. He thought he might have remembered the tailor saying his congratulations as they kissed, Will’s arms around Hannibal’s neck and shock swimming in his system. When they finally broke apart Will had remembered where they were and what they were doing with an audience, instinctually hiding his head in the crook of Hannibal’s neck and closing his eyes.

"*A tux, Malcolm, once you have his measurements. And a black velvet dinner jacket, puce silk lining and a charcoal whip stitch on the lapels. I feel it will be necessary quite soon."*

"Of course, Doctor Lecter," the tailor had replied with deference.

It had been the first time since his father's death that Will had allowed anyone to make a decision for him. Dumfounded as he had been by the situation and the feeling of unexpected, giddy happiness that had accompanied it, Will had decided to let Hannibal have his power trip. Had let the man savour the first and last time he would not be argued with till the bitter end.

Of course being married had changed all that, at least in the eyes of others. Getting pregnant even more so. Now it seemed everyone who knew him had collectively accepted that impertinent Will Graham had finally been put in his place. Now he found his hard won independence was tainted by the appearance of a strong, wealthy alpha in his life. One who, irritatingly, had every right to be in charge.

Will stood up, heading back towards the kitchen. He could hear Hannibal following him but he didn't stop until he was back upstairs, putting the used chopping board and knives into the sink, jamming on the water to rinse away the tomato seeds.

"I had hoped you would not be difficult about this," Hannibal said reasonably; it was the tone which always served to put Will's back up.

"I'm not being difficult, I just want to take care of this myself."

"Which will only prolong..." again Hannibal paused. Will turned away from the sink, drying his hands, to find Hannibal once more frowning, his head turned as if to listen while his eyes looked to the counter.

"I don't care how long it takes," Will said, ignoring Hannibal's behaviour, "if Jack wants a fight on his hands he'll damn well get one. I..."

Hannibal held up his hand for silence, making Will bristle.

"Don't think you can just wave your hand and I'll shut up," he bit out.

"I hear something," Hannibal said, sounding curt and alert.

"What?" Will asked, putting down the dish towel and bread knife on the counter as he walked towards the kitchen door determinedly.

Which was the moment their front door swung open. At first Will hadn't known exactly how to react, other than to take a faltering step backwards. He bumped into a solid chest and instinctively huddled against Hannibal, feeling absurdly safe as the man wrapped a strong arm around him and hauled him backwards into the kitchen. Will stared in disbelief as a stream of black kitted-out SWAT moved into the house, guns raised, walking almost silently on heavy tread boots. His head swam and he blinked rapidly, recognising the third man in as Jack Crawford, grey coat and gun drawn, eyes alert as he stared into the entry hall.

He heard something being picked up from the counter behind him but couldn't concentrate as the first officer turned left and saw them, calling out,

"Put the knife down! Put the knife down now!"

Knife? Was all he could think. Knife? The press of something against his neck was secondary to the thought. He felt suddenly constricted as Hannibal hauled him backwards, stumbling away from the sudden swarm of police and FBI converging in their kitchen. Will felt his breathing hitch as he met Jack Crawford's familiar, steely gaze. He felt as if he were dreaming again.

"You don't need to do this Dr. Lecter," Jack was saying.

"Hannibal..." Will managed to say, sounding strange to his own ears; quiet and terrified.

"I am disappointed Jack," Hannibal said, "I had thought we were on a first name basis. Am I to presume our friendship has come to its end?"

"Wh-what's going on?" he asked, his voice lost to the clatter of boots on wood.

"We can do whatever you want after you put the knife down and let Will go," Jack said calmly, underpinned by a harsh worry.

"Then I see we are at an impasse," Hannibal said, hauling Will back another few lurching steps until they were past the counter, heading towards the dining room stairs; Will shook, his instincts kicking in as he tried to struggle free. Hannibal held him like a vice, the crush of his hand around his right wrist grinding the bone. Will huffed out an aborted cry of pain and stayed still, "he has told you, yes? I heard him tell you."

"We can talk this through," Jack pleaded.

"I would keep your distance," Hannibal retorted, "or it will be the blood of two on your hands, Jack. Could you live with that?"

"Could you?" Jack asked, seeming stricken but appalled.

The knife, he had not seen it but it could be nothing else now but a knife, pressed tighter against his jugular. Will swallowed, feeling his skin catch on the blade. How? How had this happened? Will couldn't get himself together long enough to begin thinking it through, only able to focus on what was happening right in front of his eyes.

Crawford chasing Hannibal.

Hannibal guilty of something awful enough to merit being chased.

His husband holding a knife to his throat.

To the throat of their child.

“Hannibal,” Will managed to speak loud enough to be heard. Everyone seemed to stop. He felt the man behind him tense, as if he were unable to hide his true feelings from him; he was frantic, caught off guard, though no one could surely understand it but Will. Feel it through the tight bond they had together.

No one could understand but the man who had felt as if he had *seen* Hannibal from the first day they met, truly known him for what he was, unable to avoid being inevitably drawn in by it.

Now all of that had come crashing to a halt, broken and twisted and nightmarish. Who have you *seen*, it mocked, who did you *truly know*? He heard his voice, steady and calm as he spoke, though inside he felt as if he were dangling from the edge of the cliff face, “Hannibal, please. Let us go.”

A heavy silence. The knife moved to the right, he could feel the serrations against his skin, the moisture on the blade. *The bread knife he’d rinsed and put on the counter*. Time slowed down to the minuscule movement of steel teeth.

When the shot came Will didn’t register the pain until after he had been dragged up from the floor by strong hands, more than one pair. He could hear Crawford on his radio, ‘Hold your fire! Hold your damn fire!’ His shoulder hurt, he thought his shoulder hurt, and he felt heavy. He tried to turn but the hands, belonging to two masked SWAT officers, held him in an iron grip as he was hauled from the house. His legs would not walk. He could smell blood.

As they turned into the lobby, evening light throwing them into long shadows on the polished wooden floor, he caught sight of Hannibal through the doorway. Barely a glimpse of his upper body on the ground, gasping, eyes glazed, a pool of blood widening beneath his prone form. Will felt himself crumple as he was pulled gently over the threshold, his legs giving out.

“Oh god, oh *god* Hannibal,” he gasped, as if suddenly everything had flashed back into reality. No longer was he caught in the nightmarish bubble of the kitchen. Outside the air was cold against his face and arms, outside there were cars and vans and police and FBI rushing to and fro, outside their neighbours were standing in concerned clusters near the cavalcade of vehicles, peering on as they were held back by local beat cops. Will felt the officers to his sides take the weight of his weakened body, lifting him carefully and carrying him to the waiting EMTs, “wait, please wait” he was trying to say, but it came out as nothing but a gasp.

“Gunshot to the right shoulder, it’s gone straight through,” one of the officers was saying as the EMTs rushed up to meet them, gurney in tow, “think he’s going into shock.”

“We’ll take it from here,” a young, stern faced woman was saying, blonde hair tied tightly back above her green uniform.

“And...” as one of the officers rushed back to help his teammates, the other stayed behind, pulling down his face mask and leaning in, “he’s pregnant, Jerry. Just lost his alpha. It’s gonna be rough.”

“Jesus,” the woman said, hand on her hip as she rubbed at her forehead, “thanks Greg. We’ll take care of him.”

Lost. It was the only word Will could hear as they strapped him into the gurney, his breathing coming shallow and fast. *Lost*. Oh god, he thought blankly as the world tipped and tipped and he felt the bile in his throat, oh god please no. Everything bumped and moved as the gurney was loaded into the back of the ambulance. The bright evening light, that wonderful golden yellow, was suddenly cut off as the doors slammed shut.

“Stay as still as you can, ok Will? We’re taking you to the hospital,” he felt the lurch as they started to move, “but I need to get some fluids into your system, ok? You’ve lost some blood and you’re going into shock. I’m going to put a needle in your arm,” a sharp pain as she did as she said, “and I need you to keep it straight for me, can you do that?”

Yellow.

“Will?”

It would have been yellow.

“Can you hear me? Jake put your foot down, we’re losing him!”

She would have loved yellow.

She Wears Red Ribbons

Chapter Notes

> Just wanted to say thank you so much for all the kudos and comments, it's very encouraging! I hope the new chapter is up to standard.
>
> EDIT: Warning that this chapter contains a depiction of stillbirth. I initially did not put a warning up as I wasn't thinking and the scene caused someone great distress, for which I feel truly awful and am very sorry. If this is not something you wish to read, please take this warning into account.

The tinkling of metal down bones.

It played and it played. Looking up made sense even as it tore at his sensibility.

The skeletal remains grinned at him as the tune took shape, disjointed and discordant.

Who am I? The tiny bones asked. He wanted to close eyes he did not have.

The sound of a baby wailing. It stretched out and out, *please stop,* and on and on, *please god,* until he thought the sound would drive him from his senses.

When Will Graham blinked awake it was to the sound of his alarm, its acrid beep sounding again and again. He reached out with a vague hand, missing the first time, patting it into silence on the second. As he sat up, pulling the thin duvet with him, he could hear the soft sound of a xylophone. *Tinkling.*

He smiled on instinct, even as he felt no real need to smile; still too close to the dream. Rubbing at his face his skin felt slack, tired. The bathroom seemed too far away to his sleep weary legs. Brushing his teeth was slow and his shoulder twinged with every stroke. He decided to switch hands but the left was irregular and jerky. He swilled with mouthwash and spat, hating the sour tingle on his tongue.

After a quick splash of chill water on his heated face, he thought he felt ready to face the day. Almost. He followed the *plink-plonk* of clumsy notes until he found himself standing in a half open bedroom doorway, pushing it all the way open on creaky hinges.

“Who’s up early?” he asked in a forcedly cheerful tone.

A giggle was his reply, and the sight of a scurrying bundle of dark blue pyjamas rushing to hide. This time the smile wasn’t forced. He crept inside, crossing his arms.

“I could have *sworn* I heard something in here,” he said quizzically, walking into the room, eyes swinging side to side; another giggle, “something like a...” he paused, looking to the large wash basket in the corner behind the small, single bed. He grinned, unable to resist shouting “little girl!” as he swooped down and grabbed the squirming bundle beneath the armpits, lifting her high.

“Ah! Good, I was feeling hungry,” he said, making her squeal and laugh, “little girl pie. Sounds delicious. That’s it, in the oven with you.”

“No daddy!” she laughed as he carried her to the kitchen.

“Oh, wait,” he said, putting his hand to his forehead as he set her down on the dining room table, “I just remembered I was going to make pancakes. I suppose I’ll just have to eat you tomorrow.”

Eleanor Graham clapped her chubby hands and grinned, her long brown curls bouncing in a rabid mess around her shoulders. Her pyjamas were rather worn, old and patched, but Will didn’t mind. He thought she suited them. They went with her wild side. The clatter of claws on the linoleum sounded the procession of the strays. The three shaggy, barely-discernible-as-dogs, rushed in, tongues lolling.

“Good mornin’ puppies. You are a good dog,” she said as she reached down to clumsily pat at Buster’s matted fur, “do you like pancakes? Puppies can’t have pancakes.”

“Ok kiddo, better get these started.”

“I can help,” she insisted, struggling with her ‘c’s.

“With pancakes? Ok, you can do the flour.”

He gave her a mixing bowl to play with while he mixed the batter and fed the dogs. The handful of flour he’d put inside soon found its way on hands, then face, then into hair, onto the dogs and all over everything else. She sat in the middle of the dining table, cross legged, and tossed flour into the air with a ‘woof!’ sound leaving her mouth and startled eyes as it drifted back down. Will didn’t mind. He’d clean it up later.

The pancakes were quick and easy. Also he direly needed to go grocery shopping. It was just lucky he had eggs and milk handy or breakfast would have been rather difficult, considering they’d had boiled eggs for the past three days straight.

“You want jam?”

“Yes,” she said, bouncing up and down in her chair.

“I probably shouldn’t be giving you sugar,” he said to himself as he plastered jam onto the pancakes, “you’re hyper this morning.”

“Jam! Jam!”

“Ok, ok, here.”

The mutts happily bounced out of the backdoor when he opened it, running down to the beach, paws sinking into the sand as they ran. They'd be back later, they always came back.

It turned out the flour may have been more than Will bargained for. The shower turned the flour in her hair to a sticky glue. Will sighed as he rubbed copious amounts of shampoo through the curls, working it free while Eleanor whined about soap in her eyes.

"Then keep your eyes closed, sweetheart," he said, "there you go. All gone, see?"

She rolled around in her towel on the floor while Will showered, watching her with a shake of his head.

"You're getting that dirty," he said, knowing it fell on deaf ears.

"Dirty," she giggled, "all dirty again. I need a bath!"

"Oh no, come on, we'll be late if we don't get going soon."

Her hair fluffed as it dried, creating a wild halo around her head. She sang as Will parted it, gathering it into two even bunches to be tied off with the red ribbons he kept in the drawer.

"Friar jack, friar jack, drummer vole, drummer vole, sunny lemon tina, sunny lemon tina, ding dang dong..."

He was in stitches by the time he'd done her hair. Eleanor stared at him as if he were mad, lying back on the rough carpet, wiping at his eyes.

"Why are you crying?" she asked, confused.

"Oh, I'm ok," he sat up, another few laughs escaping, "I'm alright. It was funny, your song."

"People only cry when they are hurt."

"Not all the time, honey. It's ok. I liked your song."

"Miss Jenny taught us. She likes singin' in break."

"Yeah? Well let's get you to school and you can learn another one for me, yeah?"

He hated leaving her. Every day when he walked her to the door of Dolphin Bay Pre-school it was difficult to let go of her hand. Of course she was always pulling to let go, eyes eager and delighted squeals ringing out through the car park. So much like him, and yet nothing like him at all.

"Hey," he said, pulling her back one more time as he squatted down to her level, "don't I get a kiss?"

"Do I kiss it better?" she asked, bottom lip between her teeth.

"That's only if someone is hurt," he said, smiling.

“You were cryin'.”

“Remember, that was because I was happy.”

“Not then. You were cryin' before I went to sleep. Do you want me to kiss it better?”

Will tried to hold onto his smile but it was difficult. He blinked and swallowed. He thought he could taste the whiskey on his tongue, even though he’d washed it away with copious toothpaste and mouthwash. *Enough to drown the taste of sorrow, left in his mouth.*

“Yeah,” he said, swallowing down the memory, “course I do.”

She leaned in, grabbed his cheeks with both hands and kissed his nose. Will chuckled, pulling her in for a tight hug.

“Augh, you’re getting big,” he said, forcing himself to pull back, “go on, or you’ll be late and I’ll get in trouble. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“Bye daddy!”

The car park was empty when he stood up. Will was glad. Eleanor was too young to know, but any adult worth their salt would be able to see the wounded animal in him. He wiped at his eyes and walked back to the car. Hand on the handle, he had almost escaped before a voice called to halt him.

“Mr Graham?” he pretended not to hear, opening the door, “Mr Graham!”

Too late. He pasted on a vague smile and turned to find ‘Miss Jenny’ running up to him, her dark hair bouncing as she tripped over her sandals. Will automatically reached out to steady her, even as the feel of her hands grabbing his arm was akin to ants crawling across his skin. He pulled back as soon as she was steady, almost using the car door as a shield between them.

“Sorry!” she said, smiling shyly, “Clumsy me. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute.”

“Ok.”

“It’s about Eleanor, she...”

“What about her?” Will forced his eyes to meet hers; clear blue, lined by subtle kohl.

“Oh, it’s nothing bad,” she said, “she’s just been...oh it’s silly really. I just wondered if you knew about her ‘friend’” Miss Jenny used the bunny ears and Will felt the need to roll his eyes; he’d always hated the gesture.

“What friend?” he asked curtly.

“Her imaginary friend,” Miss Jenny said, “it’s not her fault but she’s been worrying some of the other children, and upset a few when she said they couldn’t join in her game. Apparently it’s not a ‘game’,” again the bunny ears gesture came out.

“I see,” Will sighed, “no. I didn’t know about that. I’ll have a talk with her. Did she say what it was?” he asked, “Dog? Tiger? Alien?”

“Nothing that mad,” she laughed, making Will frown, “just another little girl. I guess she’s maybe a bit lonely? Such a sweet name she’s given her too, Charlotte. I’ll let you...”

Will felt it like a sucker punch to the gut. His legs wavered and he hauled himself into the driver seat.

“Ok, thanks,” Will cut her off, closing the door behind him, continuing through the open window, “I’ll talk to her.”

“Oh, ok,” she said, laughing awkwardly, picking up on the sudden change in mood, “I hope I haven’t...”

“I said I’ll talk to her,” Will said, fumbling his glasses from the glove box and jamming them on.

Foot down, he didn’t give her a chance to reply. The old Volvo made good time down the highway and Will forced himself to calm down, even as his heart pounded in his chest. *I hope I haven’t...*her words cut at him. Will slowed, tried to change gear and heard something whine and crunch. He slammed on his hazards and pulled into the hard shoulder, breathing erratic.

In his car, on a sunny Florida morning, Will Graham put his head in his hands and wept.

Waking up was a surreal act. The world did not blink into existence; instead it seemed to unfold a sense at a time. Sound was muted, as if heard through a layer of thick cotton wool. Taste was acrid and bitter and cloying. Smell was sharp, a disinfectant and hospital mix. Touch was numb and yet warm, almost comforting.

Then further presents were unwrapped. The huff-hiss of oxygen being pumped. The steady beep of an ECG. Realisation that trying to move was futile, his sluggish limbs barely responsive. Noticing that there wasn’t merely a bitter taste in his mouth but also nausea rolling in his stomach.

Morphine, he managed to surmise as his vision cleared. He recognised the symptoms from after his operation five years prior, gunshot to the leg. They must have given me morphine, he thought groggily.

Rolling his head to the right revealed a reasonably sized room decked in white and mint green, a high rail on the ceiling supporting a half pulled curtain. There was a nurse there in blue scrubs, sorting through what seemed to be a drugs trolley. Before her sat two chairs, one empty, the other holding a familiar face.

Jack Crawford did not notice Will Graham was awake until he looked up to find him fumbling with his oxygen mask.

*“Hey,” Jack said, voice soft as if he didn’t believe what he was saying, “*hey! *He’s awake.”*

“I’ll get the doctor,” the nurse said, closing and locking the drug trolley before rushing out of the room.

“Will? You hear me ok?” Jack asked, shifting his chair closer to the bed.

His throat felt dry and the mask restricted his mouth. Will decided a slow nod was good enough. Jack seemed pleased with it.

“Good,” he said, shoulders sagging with two days worth of anxiety, “thank Christ. I...”

Will closed his eyes, finding it was difficult to open them again. Fucking drugs, he thought blearily. Somehow he managed to fumble up to his right shoulder, finding heavy bandages under his fingers.

“It’s a clean wound,” Jack was quick to point out, “went right through. They caught the fever before it got a chance to take hold. But damn you had us worried. You were out for two days. Honestly I thought you weren’t going to make it this time, you tough son of a bitch.”

Will stared at Jack’s fractious smile. Crawford was the first to look away, down to his hands. The more his mind cleared, the sharper the pictures in his memory became. Still shots in a horror gallery. The knife, the knife at his throat. *Will felt his chest contract with every breath,* Hannibal on the floor, dying, *his hand going instinctually to his stomach, then down, further, to his abdomen,* the pain in his system, trying to fight its way through the shock. *His fingers curled to claws and he let out a muffled sound of distress.*

“Hey, it’s alright,” Jack had taken hold of his right hand clumsily, as if he was holding something confusing and odd.

Tears rushed from his eyes as he blinked, running down into his hair. He turned to Jack, eyes pleading. Tell me*, they asked,* tell me it’s safe. *Crawford frowned. Will managed to bring Jack’s hand over to his own abdomen, imploring.*

“Yeah, I mean yes, you’re ok,” Jack nodded three times, “you didn’t lose the baby. You’re gonna be ok.”

Only one thing remained in the confused jumble of memories. Will held up his hand, shaking, and placed it on the bed rail. His plain, white gold wedding ring still shone on his finger. Jack stalled, licking his lips, as if he didn’t know whether what he had to say would be good news or bad news. Eventually Crawford looked him straight in the eye.

“Lecter’s alive,” he said without inflection, “he’s going to be fine. Hey,” Will was once more trying to remove his mask, “you want a hand?”

Once free Will sucked in a tight breath, as if the mask had been restricting rather than life saving. They were quiet for a moment, just the sounds of the machinery around them and Will’s shuttered breathing as a backdrop. Eventually Will focused on Jack’s tie knot, able to summon the strength for one word.

“...Why?”

“We’ve been looking for him for a long time, Will. We found some tyre marks in the mud by...” Jack stopped when he caught Will’s gaze, knowing that the specifics could wait. He hauled in a deep breath and let it out through his nose before answering in a matter-of-fact tone, “because Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, Will. We’ve arrested him on twenty five counts of first degree murder, with the opportunity for a hell of a lot more on top of that if I’m right...”

The tears became a flood. Will knew he was squeezing Jack’s hand too tightly, but he did not make a sound. The words coming from Crawford’s mouth washed over him in a black wave of blood and torn limbs and memories of newspaper articles and old crime scene photographs he’d used as teaching aids. The last thing he remembered clearly was the nurse returning to change the syringe in his morphine drip, before the litany of facts were laid out before him in Jack Crawford’s words, outlining the man he loved in his true colours.

The tow truck pulled up to his house and Will hopped out the passenger seat. The sun was high, approaching noon. He was tired, sore and drained but somehow couldn’t face the idea of sleeping. Which was probably for the best, considering he had a car to fix.

“You sure you don’t want me to take it to the garage Will?” Ralph, the local fix-it guy, leaned out of the driver’s side window and asked, adjusting his dirty red baseball cap.

“No, it’s fine,” Will said, walking to the door, “I can do it.”

“I’ll do it cheap,” Ralph said, “friend’s discount, yeah?”

“Really, I appreciate it, but it’s ok. How much do I owe you?”

“Nah, forget about that. I was going this way anyhow. You coming into work later? I could give you a lift if you need to pick up little Ellie.”

“I’ll manage.”

“Ok,” Ralph lifted his eyebrows and shrugged, sighing.

“Thanks Ralph. I’ll see you at five.”

“Anytime, man.”

The house was cool compared to the midday sun. Will couldn’t face the idea of rolling the creeper out and getting under the car to see what he’d wrecked. Instead he started cleaning up the mess Eleanor had made earlier. It became difficult to look at her small handprints in the flour.

She’d have been three last month too.

“Shut up,” he said to no one, rubbing his damp sleeve over his nose and sniffing, “just shut the hell up.”

As he finished up sorting the house the knock came. Will wished he could ignore it but, on looking through the window, he found a familiar face. He knew that ignoring the knock would only make the man go to the backdoor and try again. It was an exercise in futility, on both their parts, but Will was too tired to play the game today.

“Hey, Will,” he greeted with a smart smile, “wow, you ok?”

“Hi Milo,” he said, rubbing absently at the flour on his shirt.

“How many times, it’s Jeff, only my mother calls me Milo,” Jeff said, “you look like a bakery exploded on you.”

“We made pancakes this morning.”

“Ah, yeah I know those mornings.”

“You want to come in?” it was the last thing Will wanted, but it was what was expected of him.

“Sure.”

The next door neighbours, Jeffrey and Susan Milo. Will couldn’t say he liked or disliked them. Since moving in he’d opted for ambivalence. It hadn't worked out quite how he'd planned. They were friendly, and that was all he needed. Maybe even more than he needed, but he didn’t want to make a fresh enemy. Jeff was a good friend, and he had precious few friends left.

Plus they had a five year old son that Eleanor was besotted with, little Anthony, so Will knew it was inevitable that they’d have to be friendly. They’d turned out to be a pair of oceanographers. Key Largo wasn’t their hunting ground but apparently they loved the area, working far afield when it came to research. Jeff had taken to making surprise visits when his wife was away, normally when Will was least expecting it. Will wondered if the man thought ambushing him might spontaneously make Will more personable. He didn’t have the heart to tell him that he needed socialising like he needed a hole in the head.

“So, Susan away again?” he asked as he rinsed out the flour clogged cloth he’d used to clean.

“Yeah, three months this time,” Jeff said with a sigh, sitting down at the dining table, “she’s gone up the Institute and they’re setting out from there.”

“That’s St. Petersburg right?” Will asked.

“Yeah. She flew out this morning.”

“Bet Anthony’s taking advantage.”

“You bet,” Jeff smiled, scratching at his neck, “he acts as if I don’t know what time his mom sends him to bed, or that he doesn’t get to eat junk food when she’s around. I give in anyway, but still.”

“You’re a sap.”

“And you’re one to talk.”

“Touche. Do you want anything to drink?”

“Got anything fizzy? I need the sugar boost.”

They sat on the back porch and drank some half flat lemonade, looking out over the beach to the sparkling, pale ocean. The sand lifted in small clouds with the wind. Will brushed his hair out of his eyes only for it to blow right back.

“Was thinking of having a barbecue at the weekend if you and Eleanor want to come.”

“Sounds good.”

“I could cook some horse.”

“Yeah.”

“We could invite Stalin.”

“Mmm.”

“Will seriously.”

“I heard you. I was just winding you up.”

“Still...”

“Trying to tell me something?”

“You look rough,” Jeff said, putting down his glass on the rough wooden steps, “and you look...”

“I look what?” Will asked, turning to look at Jeff accusingly.

“Hollowed out.”

Will rubbed at his face, glad for the cool residue of the glass left on his fingers. The ocean rippled, white horses marching on the wave tops. The words of the letter danced in his eyes. *You should never have opened it*.

“Guess I feel it too,” he admitted; in a moment of weakness Will slipped, letting out what festered inside, “got another letter yesterday.”

“Jesus, that’s been a while,” Jeff said, looking at him worriedly. Will tried not to resent it as Jeff became utterly cautious, “are you...alright?”

“No,” he smiled without letting it reach his eyes, “not really.”

“Can’t you ask them to stop forwarding them on?”

“Tried. Apparently it’s not lawful, or something like that.”

“What a lot of bullshit. Christ. Good to know serial killers still have their rights,” Jeff said facetiously.

“Hey, look, I still have to see to the car,” Will said, unwilling to think further on the nightmare, “I really better get to it, or I’ll be walking Eleanor home.”

“I’ll give you a lift,” Jeff said, lifting up his hand when Will made to automatically decline the offer, “just come give me a shout, ok?”

“...Yeah,” Will nodded as Jeff stood, “thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

Will stayed on the porch until the alarm in his house sounded shrilly once more. The white horses marched on with no thought for the eyes that watched them.

The rhythmic pulse of a heartbeat, relayed through the ultrasound; the sound of life. Will lay still, eyes closed, listening as he felt the monitor move across his swollen belly. The gel was cold but he didn’t mind. The pulses surged again and again. Alive. That was all he needed to know.

“Everything looks great, Will,” the nurse, Janine, said with a smile, “five fingers, five toes. All healthy and all there. That’s what we like to see. Do you want to know the sex?”

“It’s a girl,” he said without thinking; he opened his eyes and looked at her, noting her small frown. He cleared his throat and hid his wince, “isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” she said, looking back to her monitor, “you see? There she is.”

The black and pale grey image pulsed in time with the heartbeat. The curled comma shape of a child, fingers trussed up by her barely distinguishable mouth, bobbed on the screen. Will couldn’t take his eyes from it.

“And she’s ok?”

“More than ok,” Janine said, “there are a couple of things I’m going to bring up to Doctor Hepburn-nothing major!” she clarified, before Will could worry, “Just a few odd spots in the surrounding uterus, it’s probably just a shadow. It’s nothing to worry about, I promise, I just want to make sure.”

“Ok,” Will gripped the hospital sheets and swallowed, looking back to the ceiling, “ok.”

He drifted, listening to the sound of the heartbeat throb. Somehow he managed to bear imagining Hannibal standing beside the bed, listening too.

"Our little girl," he whispered, "you were right."

"What was that?" Janine asked.

"Nothing," Will shook his head, "it's nothing."

He thought of the last eight months, most of which had been spent in and out of hospital, checks, tests, re-checks, spells of prolonged stay for monitoring. In the beginning it had been hard, so hard, to be apart from Hannibal. His body had ached for its mate. For the first three weeks the doctors had been worried he wouldn't survive the separation, as Will's organs shuttered on the edge of failing and he slipped down into a deep depression, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, unable to react. They'd tried a multitude of replacement therapies, none of which had fooled his body into thinking his alpha was near.

In the end it had been down to nothing more than his will to live, for him and the baby. For him and his little girl.

Now look at you, Will thought as he stared at the screen, his daughter sleeping happily in her safe bubble. You can do this without him, he thought, you can.

You both can.

A week later and the inevitable rolled around.

"I don't want her taking it," Will said sternly.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but this is school policy..." the Head teacher explained, her grey hair swept back in an elegant bun, contrasted with her loose, brightly coloured clothes.

"Then I'm opting her out."

"It's also *state* policy, Mr. Graham," she said significantly; when Will didn't reply she folded her arms on her desk and sat forwards. The room was small but welcoming, the walls covered in group pictures of classes over the years, smiling faces staring in from every direction. Flat macaroni figurines stuck haphazardly onto paper, babyish drawings of houses and dogs and fish were plastered on the filing cabinet. Rachel Foster was a good woman, he knew that, but she was a stickler for bureaucracy.

"I know you don't agree with the class system, I understand that, but every child over the age of three must be tested and registered. It's the law."

"Can't you just leave it until..?" Will faltered, swallowing. *Until what*? he asked himself.

"I really can't. See, we do it in groups. Olivia, Joseph, Jonathan, Allie, umm, there are a few others," she flicked through the paperwork under her hands and, on not finding what she needed, gave up, "there are about seventeen who fall into the pre-requisites this month.

Makes it easier on the paperwork not to do them individually and then send the results off. She'll not be drilled for information, it's just a simple set of cognitive, audio and coordination tests. A quick conversation with a Dynamics psychologist. Nothing major, nothing stressful. They try and make it fun, you know? Difficult to keep a three year old's attention, I'm sure you understand that."

Will had stayed quiet as she talked, biting at the thumbnail on his right hand. He took a deep breath and nodded absently, self-consciously sitting up in his chair when he realised he'd slumped into it.

"So are we ok to go ahead?" she asked when he didn't speak, "Only I need you to sign this consent form."

"...Yeah," he said after a short pause, sitting forwards suddenly to grab a pen, pulling the form over to his side of the desk and signing it messily, "just...no. Never mind. When is it for?"

"We'll do it in class-time. Thursday at midday. She'll be done by pick-up at two."

Driving Elle home was nothing but a litany of questions Will wished he didn't have to answer and things he didn't want to hear. Damn that fucking test, he cursed silently as they sat at a red light, Elle's mouth going a mile a minute from the passenger seat. Her eyes were bright and alert, as they always were when something new had been absorbed, gushing out in a frantic mess of half learned words and confused principles.

The only thing it made him glad for was that he didn't have to start their chat about Elle's imaginary friend. For a moment he felt spared a greater misery.

"And we're gonna find-find-find out which bit we go in," she rabbitted, repeating words in her urgency, "and Olivia is gonna go with me and we'll speak to a man from the sesh-secshu.."

"That's Sessions Board, honey."

"Seshuns broad," she tried, screwing up her face; Will shook his head and smiled, pulling out as the light turned green, "And Miss Jenny showed us a big map and it had all the people on it and she said she's a beta and that's in the middle, and that her husband's alfafa..."

"Alpha."

"Al-pha," she said carefully, "alpha. Daddy what are you?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, "you know that? Whatever they say, it's not important."

"But what are you?" she asked again, pouting.

Will sighed, "Omega, sweetheart. Bottom of the heap."

When her eyes lit up and she gasped dramatically, Will could only wonder as to what Miss Jenny had been telling her.

“But you’re special! Daddy, daddy did you know you’re special? Miss Jenny said boy ohmgas are special and that they feel things and that they’re ware...”

“Rare.”

“What’s rare?”

“Uhm,” Will signalled to turn left and rounded the corner slowly as he thought of a way to explain, “there aren’t many of them.”

“Oh,” she said, “like the whales.”

“Whales?” he frowned, smiling.

“Mr. Milo said there aren’t many whales left. Is that like you daddy?”

“Well, I guess,” Will laughed at the analogy, but she was already off again, enthusing.

“She said they’re special cause they’re c-c-clever and kind and,” she paused to take a quick breath, “they make good mates and that they-they...”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Will interrupted, hating to hear the words spewing from his daughter’s mouth; indoctrinating bitch, he thought acidly of Miss Jenny, with her foolish smiles and air headed bubbliness, “hey, you want an ice-cream on the way home?”

“Yeah!” she cried out, grinning, “it was hot today at playtime and I was thirsty so I drank lots of juice but I was still hot and Manny pulled my hair so I pushed him in the sand but then I got in trouble and-and-and I had to sit in the corner.”

“It’s not nice to hurt people.”

“But he pulled my hair!”

“I know sweetheart, I know.”

“I don’t wanna be a beta.”

“How come?”

“They’re boring.”

“Mr and Mrs Milo are betas, so is Anthony,” Will explained; a nice, safe, happy little family of betas. Sometimes the thought made Will jealous beyond belief.

“Yeah but they’re just boring,” she said again, crossing her arms, “I wanna be special like you, but Miss Jenny said girl ohmgas aren’t special. I wanna be alfafa.”

“Alpha,” Will corrected automatically, even though hearing it made his stomach cramp.

“Al-pha. I wanna be alpha, cause then I could push Manny in the sand pit and I’d not have to sit in the corner.”

“Remember, it doesn’t matter what you are,” Will said, hands tight on the steering wheel.

“Don’t wanna be a stoopid beta,” she sulked, slumping down in her seat.

“Let’s get you that ice cream, yeah?” Will sighed.

“That’s it, that’s it Will, push!”

“I can’t, god I can’t...” he gasped, feeling faint, sweat pouring from his forehead, right hand twisted into the sheet, claw-like, back aching until it felt as if it would snap.

“You can, you can do it, don’t stop now,” the nurse held his hand just as tightly as he held hers while the pain tore through him, mixed with fear and exhaustion in equal measure.

“I can see the head,” came another voice from the bottom of the bed, hidden by the sheet tented over his raised knees.

“That’s it, you hear that?” the nurse smiled, shaking his hand, “Just one more push and it’ll all be over, come on,” she called as Will grit his teeth, screaming through his clenched jaw, head shoved back into the pillow, eyes tight shut, “that’s it! That’s it!”

“Oh there she is,” came an emotional voice from the midwife.

Relief. The air left his body in a rush, huffed back in by fatigued lungs. Sudden and overwhelming relief flooded him as the pressure broke and the pain sank and the contractions stopped and his body went limp. Will kept his eyes closed and breathed long and low, swallowing what little saliva he could gather down his ragged throat, hoarse from hours of screaming and yelling obscenities.

It was as the quiet continued that he opened his eyes and looked up. He could see the nurse’s back, looking down, her face hidden. Then the midwife stood, carrying a barely discernible bundle in her arms to the pre-prepared table, laying it on the blanket. ’Ultrasound was fine three weeks ago’ he thought he heard, as the women murmured closely together.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, feeling the first tingling of panic.

“Will, please just be calm,” the nurse said, turning back to hold his hand, blocking his view of the midwife and the baby.

“What-what’s wrong? Why is she quiet? She’s not crying...” he felt his chest seize.

“Will,” the nurse turned to look over her shoulder; the midwife looked up, solemn. She shook her head and Will felt the bottom drop out of his world.

“No,” he said, shaking his head as his face crumpled, “oh no, no, no! No, that’s not possible, please, she was fine! Please, that’s not..!”

“Will, look at me, ok? Just look at me,” the nurse hunkered down beside the bed, her eyes glassy, “she hasn’t been breathing for a long time.”

“No,” he sobbed, hand coming to his mouth as his eyes squeezed shut, “that isn’t possible, oh god please,” his voice stuttered into a long held, keening sound, like an animal in pain; then suddenly the pain in his chest seemed real, and it moved lower and lower and the pain built and built until he was gritting his teeth and huffing out his breath, “oh god, what..?”

“Maria?” the nurse was saying urgently, “Maria I think there’s another!”

“But that’s...twins,” the midwife hurried back, pulling her chair back in with an abrasive scraping.

“The heartbeat,” the nurse was saying to her, sounding shocked, “it was the twin. Ok,” she turned back to Will who was staring at her, lost, “ok listen. You have another baby coming, I know you’re exhausted and I know it’s the last thing you want to think about right now but I need you to push.”

“I can’t,” Will croaked out, tears burning his eyes, “please I can’t.”

“You can, you have*, it won’t be as hard this time I promise. You can do this for her Will.”*

“But what if..what if she’s...” he paused to clench his teeth and groan as the pain lanced up his spine and burned between his legs, “oh god I can’t!”

“She’s going to be fine Will, if we can get her out. Come on, you’re so brave, you can do this for her.”

“Can’t...” his breathing stuttered out of sync with his heart and Will convulsed; his head swam and the pain consumed him, turning harsh and gritty; more than it had been before. Far more.

“Cynthia, get the doctor,” the midwife said suddenly, voice pale.

“What..?” the nurse asked, before turning to look and suck in a breath; Will’s head lolled to the left, catching sight of the midwife standing, her scrubs drenched in fresh, red blood.

The world seemed to roll like a wave, up with a high and down with a drop in his stomach. The air became thick and heavy and he couldn’t focus. His eyes rolled in his head. Will slipped into the waiting blackness without the ability to stop it.

Time was as nothing. As quickly as his eyes had closed, so did they open.

When he woke it was to the sound of wheels on the hard floor, rushing back and forth in a steady motion, and the sound of gurgling. The lights were dimmed when he finally managed to open his eyes, revealing a young male nurse, white blonde hair and a wide smile, rolling a trolley back and forth before him.

Everything hurt. Nothing specific, just a blanket of discomfort and pain laid over his prone form. He supposed his eyelids didn’t hurt, or his elbows, but they seemed to be exceptions. He

looked around for a drip and, finding it, found the clicker on the bed by his hand. It was difficult to grasp but he managed, clicking the button decisively and waiting for the rush. When the morphine kicked in it was akin to bliss, even though he knew the nausea would follow soon after.

"Hey, you're awake," the nurse said, pulling Will's eyes to him, "I know you're pretty groggy right now but they said it would be alright if you want to hold her."

The bed tipped with a mechanical whine, sitting Will up. He winced slightly at the feeling in his abdomen, his hand going to the skin at the base of his bump and finding a heavy wound dressing as a barrier to his skin. When he took the baby, swaddled in cloth and kicking her legs, Will looked at her with wonderment, only able to ask,

"How did you get here, huh? How did you get here?"

"If you want I could..." the nurse stopped, clearing his throat, "You see she didn't turn. It's what we call a LOT, she was lying sideways..."

"Breech?" Will asked clinically as the situation began to sink in, peeling back the cloth from the baby's face to get a better look at her.

"Right, yeah, that's it," the nurse looked sorry and Will knew what was coming before he said it, "you had a rupture, in the uterine wall. It's rare in first births but not impossible. We had to do an emergency c-section, but we couldn't control the bleeding..."

"Hysterectomy?" Will asked, monotone, as he stared at the baby's eyes, bright and long lashed and distinctly maroon in colour; Hannibal's eyes.

"Yes," the nurse nodded, seeming genuinely regretful, "I'm really sorry, I really am. The surgeons tried everything they could."

"I know," Will said softly, swallowing down the hurt and the pain and the shock and the need to hide and never come out again; a small, flailing hand against his cheek distracted him from the dark place, bringing him back, "where...where is she?"

"I'm sorry, who do you..?"

"My other...my other daughter. Where is she?"

"Oh, I...she's been," the man cleared his throat and stood up from lounging against the wall, "taken to the morgue."

"I see," Will said with a pained smile, nodding his head.

"She, uhm," he paused, waiting for consent; eventually Will nodded, "I'm afraid the umbilical cord had become wrapped around her neck."

"How long?"

“We’re not sure. It may have been up to a month,” he quickly changed the subject, “we didn’t know, I mean we weren’t expecting it. I read your file, said there were always odd spots on the ultrasounds,” Will nodded, “it was a second amniotic sac. Sometimes, it’s rare, but sometimes in male omega pregnancies the baby can slip. Your uterus isn’t the same as a womans, and it can fold to accommodate another foetus. So it...yeah,” Will guessed the man could tell he was no longer listening, if he ever had been.

One behind the other, the living hiding the dead. Will absently stroked over the baby’s arm, causing her to blow bubbles from her mouth and make a sucking sound.

“So,” the nurse cleared his throat, looking around awkwardly, “what’s her name? Did you have a name?”

The little bundle in his arms let out a burble and fumbled at his chin. Will ducked down to kiss at the tiny fingers, eyes closed tight in momentary sorrow, all that he could allow himself without falling apart.

“Eleanor,” he said, “her name is Eleanor.”

A hand appeared on his shoulder. Will looked up sharply, resenting the touch. Human contact had become a tricky subject since Hannibal had been incarcerated. His craving for it was difficult to ignore, but receiving it was unpleasant. The smell that accompanied it was wrong, and the pressure was never the same. It was as if his body knew his alpha’s touch, and berated him for trying to accept an imposter’s.

“If you want me to,” the nurse said, gripping tighter; Will bore it, “I can...for your other girl, if you want I can put her name down. I’ll make sure it gets to her. If you want me to. It’ll go on her certificate.”

After a pause, long enough for the nurse to remove his hand, Will nodded. He kept his eyes on Eleanor as he spoke.

“Charlotte,” he said, so quietly he was amazed the nurse could hear; he cleared his throat and leaned his head back against the rough, white pillow case, eyes closed, “he wanted to call her Charlotte.”

“Don’t chase the pigeons!” he called, shaking his head, arms full with two bulging grocery bags.

The car park was packed, forcing Will to wind his way through the maze-like jumble of cars to his own pale blue Volvo sitting like a sardine in a can near the back row. The shop had been a stressful mix of trying to find what he needed in the under stocked shelves, avoiding the hundreds of other patrons as they ploughed ahead with no thought for him and, worst of all, trying to stop Eleanor opening everything he put in his shopping cart from her little bucket seat by the handles. And now, as per the course, his three year old wasn’t making the return journey any easier.

“Elle,” he said as she laughed, chasing after the wild eyed grey birds, fluttering away from her and running on their stubby pink legs, “Elle, c’mere!”

Then he saw it. The car turned in, gleaming red and sleek, rumbling under the weight of an overpowered engine as it sped through the car park. Elle waved her hands and jumped after the closest bird with a ‘gotcha!’, right out into the road. Time slowed down.

“*Elle*!”

The bags dropped. Will ran what must have only been ten feet, but seemed like ten hundred. Reaching out and grabbing the back of her black, cotton jacket and her pleated red skirt, Will pulled her back as the car screeched to a halt. Everything became very still until his mind caught up, realised that they were both there, safe, sitting on the gravel littered ground. His heart was hammering and suddenly she was crying in his arms, a long, slow wail of fright.

“Hey man, you ok? Jesus, I didn’t see her. Is she alright?” Will looked up to see a young man, face pale with worry, eyes wide, standing by the red car, engine still running.

“Sorry,” Will breathed as he struggled up, Elle heavy and awkward in his arms, his breathing heavy and his hold on her tight and constricting, “we’re fine. It’s fine.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” the man was saying, rubbing the back of his neck; when Will turned round people were staring, half way out their cars or walking towards the entrance, eyes intrigued and mouths moving.

Will rushed her to the car, throwing open the door and strapping her in. She sat, nose running and face crumpled in a sob. He locked her in and went to retrieve his bags, hands shaking. Only a few things had rolled loose. A nearby woman helped him round them up, even if she didn’t look particularly happy with him. When he got back to the car he leaned against it, forehead resting against the glass. He could hear her mumping and crying intermittently. He took a deep breath, but it did nothing to calm him.

“How many times do I have to tell you to *listen* to me,” he said angrily as he drove them home, “Elle, I swear to god, stop crying.”

“D-d-didn’t mean it,” she said, breaking into a hiccoughing cry.

“That doesn’t matter,” he jammed the gearstick into place and turned into his driveway, “you could have been...” *dead dead dead,* his mind supplied unhelpfully, “hurt, you could have been hurt. You said you didn’t want me to be sad, right?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded, sniffing noisily and wiping at her face clumsily.

“Then you have to listen to me and not run off,” Will tried to calm down as he jerked the handbrake up, “because I’d be sad if anything happened to you.”

“Didn’t mean it daddy,” she said, leaving snail trails on her jacket sleeves as she wiped her nose.

“I know honey,” he said rubbing at his mouth, “I know ok? Just promise me you’ll be careful from now on.”

“Promise,” she said quietly, lost to her jacket as she remained buried in it.

It wasn’t until he stepped out of the car that he realised there was a car parked on their street, a grey, non-descript saloon sitting precisely by the pavement. Will looked at it with a frown as he retrieved Elle from the passenger seat, lifting her down. As he watched, getting his bags from the boot, a door opened and a young woman stepped out. She looked mid twenties to early thirties at the most, dark hair fashionably shoulder length, curling under with millimetre precision. Will was suspicious of the regimental look to her clothing, the grey of her knee length skirt and her jacket matching her car, white shirt beneath, black court shoes tapping on the concrete.

He ignored her, even as it was obvious she was approaching him. Elle hid behind his legs as he turned the key in the lock.

“You go inside, ok?” he said, sending her scurrying in; he heard the shoes stop behind him.

“Will Graham?”

The voice was soft, a southern curl to her r’s, her vowels coming from the back of her mouth making her accent seem deep and rich. Will put down his bags just inside the door and turned. She was pretty up close, clear blue eyes and a slightly upturned nose, but there was also a severity to her features that spoke of a lack of experience; a little girl wearing grown up clothes. She reached into her pocket when he didn’t answer straight away.

“Don’t bother,” he said, stalling her movements, “I don’t need to see the badge. Crawford sent you, right?”

She blinked twice, though her expression did not change. Will gave her the benefit of the doubt and guessed if he was to look at her badge it would sport a recent date. Only just an agent and no more; Jack was either getting lazy or desperate.

“Great,” he sighed, letting out a derisive chuckle, “look, I don’t really have the time for...”

“My name is Clarice Starling,” she interrupted, pulling out her badge regardless of his protests; Will felt vindicated as he noted the date, *three months prior*, “I’m here as a courtesy. May I come inside?”

“What’s this about?” Will asked, tired.

“It’s actually about a case I’m currently working on,” she paused, “I’d really rather talk somewhere private if we can?”

“I said I’m busy...”

“It’s about Dr. Lecter,” she said without preamble.

“No shit it is,” he said; she looked a little taken aback, “why the hell else would anyone want to talk to me?”

“Then may I..?”

She’s precocious, isn’t she? Will flinched. The familiar voice, speaking as if just over his left shoulder, held a curious tone. He ran a hand through his hair, blinking, before he heard Elle calling from inside.

“Da-ad, Buster wants outside.”

“Alright,” he called in; when he turned back to Agent Starling she hadn’t moved, “seems like you’re still here,” he said wryly, sighing, “Jack knows how to pick them. Well, I guess you’d better come in then.”

“Thank you,” she said, unflinching in the face of his cynicism.

The door shut decisively behind them. The clouds moved quickly over the water and the wind picked up. Birds scattered from the marram grass on the dunes, wings flapping and catching the late afternoon sun.

One thousand, one hundred and fifty two miles from Will Graham’s little ship on the sea, a pair of lips smiled in their cage.

The Blink Moment

“Thanks for doing this Milo.”

“How many times Will?” the man smiled.

“Right,” Will’s smile was a half aborted mess, “Jeff.”

The sound of the car running on the street mixed with Elle’s squeals as she and Anthony ran into view, rushing through the corridor, made Will antsy. He scratched his nose and tried to believe he was doing the right thing. It was difficult, mainly because he *knew* he was doing the right thing but in truth he didn’t want to.

“E-everything is in her bag,” he said, even though he was sure he was just repeating himself now, “she doesn’t like carrots and she’s gone off bacon in the past couple of weeks, not sure why. Umm, if you need me I’ll be on the numbers I gave you. Both mobiles work and-I gave you Jack Crawford’s right?”

“Yeah, you did,” Jeff said, smiling an understanding smile; it made Will feel like a terrible person. He avoided looking at it.

“Good, ok,” he hung around the doorway, listening to the children run and bicker, ‘*Tony do-on’t!’* he heard, then a thump and a laugh. He swallowed, “ok, well...”

“We’ll be fine Will, I promise. I'll feed the dogs, I'll keep everyone safe,” Jeff said; the man looked as if he wanted to clap Will on the shoulder for reassurance but knew better of it, "she won’t leave my sight till you’re back."

“At the risk of sounding like an asshole, that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Jeff frowned worriedly, opening his mouth as his eyes flicked towards the street, “Are you sure you want to..?”

“Don’t ask me,” Will bit out, wrapping his arms around himself and shaking his head, “don’t. I have to. It’ll only be a couple of days, three tops. There, interview, report, back again. Easy.”

Jeff didn’t say anything, just stood with his hand on the doorframe, his other with its thumb through his belt loop. He licked his lips and avoided Will’s eyes. Will wondered if he looked as manic as he felt. *You’re leaving her,* his conscience supplied, *you’re leaving her, you’re leaving her*.

“It’ll only be a couple of days,” he repeated, forcing his arms down, “and I’ll call. Will you be in if I call?”

“We might need to go out for groceries, or whatever, but I’ll keep my phone on me all the time. Just call my mobile, alright?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Will...”

“Don’t, please, I know what you’re...” he stopped harshly, mouth snapped shut as he rubbed at his eyes, “I have to go. The plane leaves in an hour.”

“We’ll be waiting here for you when you get back,” Jeff said, finding Will’s gaze and holding it.

“Ok,” Will nodded, “ok I...I’ll say goodbye then. Could you get her for me?”

Anthony and Eleanor were rounded up, Jeff picking up his son with a grin and an ‘*oh, who’s been getting beat up by girls again?*’ while Anthony squawked in indignation. Elle ran to her father, arms out. For a moment Will had a terrible thought that it might be the last time he ever saw her. It was fleeting and irrational but painful enough for him to scoop her up and hold her tightly, eyes closed.

“Daddy, we found snails in the back ga’den,” she was saying, “and Tony put one on my face. It was yucky!”

“He did, huh?” Will tried his best to sound normal as he stroked her curls.

“Daddy, the lady’s wavin’ at you.”

Will turned to see Agent Starling by her car, waving up at the house. As he watched she patted her wrist where her watch sat. Will nodded down to her.

“Ok,” he said, sitting Elle back in his arms so he could see her face, her little legs on either side of his waist, “dad’s got to go now. But I’ll be back very soon and-and I’ll call, ok? I’ll speak to you tonight, in fact, that’ll be nice yeah?”

“You’re going on a big plane,” she grinned, patting his jacket, “I wanna go on the plane. Whoosh!” she stabbed up with her hand, “I wanna go on a big plane too.”

“I’ll take you next time,” Will said, unable to hide his grimace, “sorry honey, I’ll have to put you down. I have to go now.”

“I can see you on the phone?” she asked, looking at him with a seriousness that seemed out of place on a toddler; for a stunning second Will couldn’t reply. She looked just like Hannibal.

“You can’t see people on the phone,” he shook his head as he put her down, staying hunkered by her.

“But Mr. Milo has skip!”

“Skip?” Will frowned, “oh, Skype. Right. I might not have that where I am, but if I do then yes, I will see you on the phone.”

She smiled, grabbing him by the cheeks, “Should I kiss it better?”

“Yeah,” Will did his best to smile in return, “I’d like that.”

The drive to the airport was quiet, even though he could feel Agent Starling next to him, itching to open her mouth. Will stared out of the passenger seat window, watching the flowing beach lands begin to give way to small shops, then more built up residential, then the flat, commercial district heading into Miami. After half an hour of no radio and worrying himself sick about leaving his only child in order to gallivant off across the country on a fool’s errand, Will spoke up.

“You just have to ask.”

“Excuse me?” she said, sounding a little wary.

“I said you just have to ask,” he turned in his seat and looked at her, “I can hear your mind ticking over. It’s very distracting. I’d rather we just got this over with.”

“Alright,” she said, no nonsense, “what did she test?”

“Why is everyone always so interested?” Will asked as if talking to himself.

“You said it was ok,” she pointed out, eyebrows raised, eyes trained on the road.

“Alpha. A week ago.”

“Glad?”

“Not sure yet.”

“Most parents would be,” she pointed out.

“Maybe,” Will glanced over the idea; *Hannibal would have been so proud*, “They did it at school, the test. Never used to be so casual. Remember when you had to do it as an in-patient?”

“Yeah,” Starling said as she slowed for the lights, “scared the crap out of me, my parents hauling me off to hospital. I thought I had a disease.”

That garnered a quiet laugh from Will, brief and bitter. He looked at Clarice Starling, knowing full well that he was staring.

“Is there something *you* want to ask?” she asked.

“No,” he said, knowing what she would have expected, “not really.”

The conversation withered as they approached the airport. Will watched the planes fly out overhead, seeing the wings ready to take him far from home.

The car was parked messily in the driveway, the door half closed behind him as he hurried up the short steps to the entrance, key shaking in the lock. He slammed it behind him just for the joy of the violent act. The front room was chill without the fire lit; Will stalked between the furniture, right hand to his hip, left to his mouth.

The sound of approaching footsteps told him Hannibal had been preparing to leave; it was the only time he wore shoes in the house. They stopped by the doorway. Will kept his eyes to the floor as he paced.

"I don't want to work there anymore."

A sigh. It made Will's hackles rise, "Am I to presume Purnell or Conrad this time?"

"S-stop, second guessing me!" Will bit out, distressed, trying to reign his temper back in; he refused to look Hannibal in the eye, "You don't need to pick anyone out, they're all the fucking same. Every single one of them, sneering behind their smiles and their good mornings. I can't stand it. If I hear one more quip about me being on a damn leash I'll crack, I swear I'll do someone a damage. The bunch of two faced bastards can take their job and shove it."

"I have told you on many occasions that my lawyers are more than capable..."

"I don't want a fucking lawyer!" Will shouted, glaring at Hannibal, hurt, frustrated, "I want to do my job! What are you going to do? Sue everyone on the payroll at Quantico? For Christ's sakes, I'm talking centuries of bigotry and you're talking about lawyers*. I don't-want-to-work-there-any-more," he said with clearly delineated anger.*

Hannibal pursed his lips, running the car keys in his hands through his fingers, eyes trained on the sofa. Will felt like a fool but was too angry to care.

"I merely do not want you to do something rash which you will regret."

"And don't I get to make that decision?"

"You love your job, Will."

"I love you," Will said without thinking; he hesitated when Hannibal's eyes flicked to him, sharp and calculating, "...and I love us, being together. My job, my damned job, can take the backseat. I could...I could work from home. Start writing again. I've always been a better teacher than a field agent. Harris, you remember Harris right? He said the journals are always looking for new forensic papers."

"I think it would be best if you slept on it, see how you feel after some rest."

"Rest?" Will scoffed, hands on hips as he rocked back on his heels, "Shit, a rest? If a decent night's sleep would miraculously stop Hatcher calling me a leashed bitch when he thinks I can't hear him I'd gladly go for it."

“He said that of you?” Hannibal’s lips thinned, his eyes narrowing as he stared towards the bright window.

“Oh if you like that you’d love some of the others,” Will muttered, “I want out of there, and I don’t want to wait this time. The longer I wait then the more chance I’ll never do it at all.”

He watched Hannibal approach him with a sense of fight or flight. Will squared his shoulders and tried to look stalwart, even as his instincts told him to make himself look small, lean his head slightly to the left to bare a little more neck.

You’re not afraid of him, he told himself sternly. It was futile. Will knew that, on some level, he would always fear Hannibal, even as he loved him. Hannibal stopped before him, reaching up to take hold of Will by the sides of his shoulders. Will allowed himself to be pulled into a slow embrace. The frustration and the anger and the worry and the fear melted, leaving only the need to curl closer. A strong hand stroked smoothly down his back, rubbing small circles along his spine. Will let out a pent up breath, his forehead coming to rest on Hannibal’s shoulder.

“Did you take your suppressant therapy this morning?”

The suddenness of his fury was a little sickening. So much so that Will was silent as he pushed away from Hannibal, the other man letting him go without a fight. He caught sight of Hannibal’s resigned features as he stormed from the front room, heading for the stairs.

“Will...” Hannibal had followed, standing in the lobby.

“You’re a classic case,” Will spat, stopping half way up the first flight, tone tight with anger, “you know that? A classic case. Just like the rest of them, only you’re worse. Want to know why?”

“Why?” Hannibal asked, humouring him.

“Because they’re just a bunch of hypocritical morons that couldn’t think for themselves if the world depended on it,” he said without a hint of sarcasm, “and you’re the love of my fucking life. So maybe you could think about that next time before you ask me if I’ve taken my meds, because I can barely stand their bigotry Hannibal, I don’t think I could stomach yours.”

“I did not mean to imply...”

“I know exactly what you wanted to say,” Will said, lips thin as he nodded, “because I’m two weeks from heat and you think I’m overreacting. Just a stupid little fit, must be my time of the year, yeah? Well you can just fuck off with the rest of them. Of course I took my damn pills, you think that’s what I want? To be a slave to my damn hormones? I’m not a child!”

“I do not appreciate your tone, nor your insults,” Hannibal lifted his chin, eyes cold.

“Oh I’m so sorry, did I offend your delicate, European sensibilities?” Will was unable to stop himself walking back down the stairs, slowly one by one, hand trailing the banister, “Would you prefer I just kept my mouth shut, huh? Did as I was told?” he stopped in front of

Hannibal, eyes alight with ire; Hannibal seemed as stone; cold and still, "would you like that?"

One hand lifted to grab a fistful of Hannibal's immaculate grey jacket, causing the man to seize Will by the wrist, pulling it free and holding his wrist tightly. Hannibal did not react further than that, his face clinically set.

"Is that what you fucking want?" Will asked, eyes creasing; his other hand was caught as he made to grab again, Hannibal easily holding him at bay, "Is it? You want me to sit there and 'yes, alpha, no alpha, anything you damn well want, alpha'? Because you've picked the wrong man, alright? The wrong man. I know what I want. It's you *that doesn't know what they damn well want!"*

"I want you to be happy," Hannibal said seriously, face impassive and inscrutable.

"Why?"

"Beg pardon?" Hannibal let go of his wrists when Will pulled back.

"I asked you why," Will said, rubbing at the reddened skin, "it shouldn't be that difficult a question, but I'm beginning to wonder if it is. We've been married nearly three months. I want you to tell me, why the hell do you want me to be happy?"

The muted sound of traffic from the quiet road outside, the early evening birds singing in the cherry trees in the garden; the sounds between them as they stood, facing each other. Will wrapped his right arm across his waist, holding onto his left elbow. The clock ticking in the lounge became abrasively loud. The quiet seemed only to accentuate his chuff of derisive laughter.

"Right," he nodded, "right. You know, I shouldn't have even...I think I'm going to be at the cabin for a while."

"...I would rather you stayed," Hannibal said, eyes fixed on the doorframe.

"Then maybe you should give me a reason to."

"What do you want?"

"What?"

"You have spent the last fifteen minutes castigating me for not knowing what I want," Hannibal said, watching him calmly, "but you have not said what it is you want from me."

Will watched him, simmering, hating that Hannibal always managed to turn his arguments back onto Will himself, that he managed to stay so icily calm. And just what is it that you want? He asked himself. Just what is it you need?

"What I want?" Will shook his head, feeling suddenly drained, "You know, that's such a big question I don't..."

Just say it, he thought, just bloody say it.

"I saw something today," he hesitated before ploughing ahead, "It wasn't anything special, just a family out with their kids at lunch. Little girl, big smile on her face, mom and dad on either side swinging her back and forwards and I thought..." Will swallowed, "I've never wanted something so badly in my life."

"...A family?" Hannibal asked after a cautious pause.

"Love," he clarified, his smile pained, "I want you and me. I want kids. I want a life where I don't have to worry about looking so far down into the madness that I deal with every day that I become it before I even realise what's happened. Before I wake up with blood on my hands and no idea how it got there. I don't want to be stuck in that rut any longer, doing what I'm told and being bitter and cynical and hating myself for putting up with it. I want to make us happy," Will sat down on the stairs, running his hands through his hair, "before I screw up the one good thing I have."

Slow steps. Hannibal sat down next to him, straightening out his rumpled jacket. He put his elbows on his knees and sniffed, his lip hitching momentarily upwards in a familiar twitch. Will felt his hesitation, even though to look at him no one would guess he was anything but utterly composed.

"Then that is what I want."

"Don't patronise me," Will sighed, shaking his head.

"That is the last thing I wish to do," Hannibal explained, turning to look Will directly in the eyes; Will forced himself to hold the stare, "you asked me why I want you to be happy. It is because when you are happy, I am happy. When you are happy it gives me hope. When you are happy I feel I have a reason to be a good man. My aunt and uncle would have happily gifted me some morose girl from good breeding stock, a wealthy background, like my father had before me, and his before that I am quite sure. I am not one to follow with tradition," Will heard the placation there – not one to follow conventions of class and all that came with it, "*you make me a better man than I ever hoped to be. That is not something I wish to lose."*

Speechless wasn't an adjective he thought had ever been applied to him before, but it was appropriate now. With bells on. Hannibal took his hand and they sat on the stairs, looking ahead. The clock chimed in the lounge and Will swallowed.

"So," Hannibal said, "Should I drive you to the cabin?"

Will shook his head. He ran his free hand through his hair and down the back of his neck, rubbing at his shoulder.

"You wish to stay here."

Will nodded.

“Then I suggest you stop taking your suppressants,” Hannibal said, drawing Will’s gaze, “and I can help you compose a letter of resignation that will be suitably watertight. Legally, you understand.”

He took a shaky breath and let his hand drop to his lap. He felt as if he’d been put in a washing machine with fear, hope, sadness and anger in equal measure, and had come out dry on the other side. There was a welling sense of relief simmering in his gut.

“You want me to stop taking the therapy?”

“How else are we to have children?”

“Hannibal...”

“Believe me when I say I am not a man to compromise lightly. I am not saying this simply to placate you. Personally I think I will make a wonderful father.”

“You’re so modest,” Will laughed, stopped, covered his mouth as he laughed again, the relief churning to a happiness he wasn’t sure how to handle, “then we’re going to do this.”

“It seems so,” Hannibal smiled his subtle smile.

“You were going out,” Will cleared his throat, “before I...will you be late?”

“It can wait. I feel I have more pressing issues.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm. Very important, pressing issues.”

“Pressing?”

“Very much so.”

A kiss that stole what little breath he had left.

“Upstairs?”

“Most certainly. I believe practice makes perfect, as they say.”

Will laughed as he was picked up bodily, and carried up the stairs. Being objective, it seemed, had no place here. Happiness, he thought, was an utterly subjective art.

“Could you drive me to the hotel?”

“Jack asked me to bring you to HQ,” Starling said as they picked up the rental car from Baltimore-Washington International.

“Jack didn’t ask you to do anything,” Will smiled tightly as he opened the door, “he *told* you to bring me to Quantico. And you can tell him right back that I’m not setting foot in the building. They can come get me from the hotel.”

“I don’t think that’s...”

“You know we’re still at the airport,” Will pointed out, looking at her over the top of the car, “I could catch a flight back to Miami in an hour.”

He’d come to realise that Clarice Starling’s range of facial expressions were rather limited, more than likely entirely on purpose. She looked mildly interested but utterly blank. Will guessed, under her professional mask, she was fizzing, wishing she didn’t have to ferry this uptight asshole half way across the country. Will knew because it’s what he would have thought if he were her.

“Alright,” she said eventually. They got in the car, “I’ll let Jack know.”

He was left on the doorstep with a phone number, the time of a meeting the next day and a room number. The porter took his bag and Will allowed himself to be guided through the relatively nice hotel. His room turned out to have one of the pleasanter views, if the bell boy was to be believed; out over the harbour. Will thought he could see Fort Henry out on the point, the cars ferrying back and forth below them like ants by the glistening water.

“Can I get you anything sir?” Will was asked as he stood by the windows, peering down.

“Mmm?” he turned, “Oh, no. Thank you.”

A reasonable tip exchanged hands. The boy looked mildly pleased with the amount. Will was just glad he wasn’t staying long. The room was clearly a suite catered to omegas. Jack’s doing, he was sure. The man was always overly cautious on Will’s part. In a way he was pleased, the towels were incredibly soft, the bed was sunken into the floor, heavy duvet, thick pillows, black out blinds on the windows, a deep bath. Even a hilarious, if somewhat offensive, booklet in the nightstand on what to do in a slew of ridiculous situations; ‘*if the resident becomes overly emotional...’* or ‘*if the resident accuses you of inappropriate behaviour...’*. Will took a few minutes, lying down in the bed and feeling absurdly comfortable, to skim through and chuckle. All the scenarios appeared to end with ‘*contact their registered alpha or your local Dynamics centre specialist’*.

He put the book back and closed the drawer. Staring up at the ceiling, Will relaxed on his back, hands folded over his stomach. This room was everything he could possibly want, and yet all it served to do was make him feel incredibly, uncomfortably different from everyone else. After years of training himself to live like a person, suddenly he felt plunged into a world catered around his status.

There was a pull out table by the head of the bed. Will set up his laptop and logged onto the wi-fi. It was quick and easy to set up his secure connection, and there was no surprise when he saw the set of emails sitting in his inbox. *Crime scene report – 21/05/2014; Coroner’s report,Leeds Family– 23/05/2014; Coroner’s report – Jacobi family 13/03/2014*...Jack had been busy, Will thought wryly. It seemed that agreeing to talk to Lecter on behalf of the BAU

had been interpreted as him coming back to the team. Will was beginning to wonder how long he'd be able to convince himself that wasn't the case.

They were calling him the Tooth Fairy, it seemed. Will sneered at the moniker. The press liked their nicknames, no matter how distasteful. Will reminded himself to ask Jack how they got enough information to come up with it when he saw him the next day. Before that he clicked and downloaded the files he'd been sent.

The first report he opened showed three photographs. The first a view of a large double bed, the man propped against the headboard, the woman spread out along the bottom, face up. Intermittent blood slanted up the walls. The second was a detail of the blood spatter, showing a shadow pattern; *someone had been in the way*, Will thought as he drifted into the familiar pattern, seeing where the pieces fit. Then the third scrolled into view. The face of a young girl, no older than seven, mutilated, her eyes shining like blank diamonds.

Will closed the laptop with a swift click and took a deep breath. He stared straight ahead, holding the breath until it began to hurt. It came out in rush and he coughed roughly. All he could see was *Elle dead, Elle bloodied, Elle calling for him and he wasn't there to help her.* After a few minutes he managed to call room service.

"This is room 728. I'd like some scotch. A bottle."

"Yes sir," the polite woman on the other end asked; he could hear typing. There was a pause, "I'm sorry to have to ask you such a personal question, sir, but to order more than five hundred mills of spirits I need to know if you're within three weeks of your heat."

"You need to *what*?" Will asked, incredulous.

"You're unaccompanied by a registered alpha, sir, it's part of our insurance that..."

"Thanks for your concern but I've had a fucking hysterectomy," he said acidly, "so that oughta tell you how close I am to my next heat. Can I have my god damn scotch now?"

"Yes sir," she sounded mortified but Will didn't have the energy to care, "of course."

He hung up with enough force to judder the phone across the table. Fucking stupid piece of shit, Will seethed. He'd read about the mayor of Baltimore. A traditionalist, a down home alpha with his head stuck in the sand; in simpler terms, an utter bigot. Always passing new policies just to make life difficult for those he saw as abnormal - omegas without alphas to keep them in line. He hadn't known that it had gotten this bad. It suddenly seemed a hell of a lot longer since he'd been here.

He sat back down on the bed. His eyes closed. Behind them the little girl's face blasted up, blood and pale skin and eyes like mirrors.

Will forced himself to open them again. He decided to call home, even though he'd only been gone five and a half hours by his watch. The Skype bleeped and the symbol danced. After a few tries he managed to get through.

“Will, hey,” Jeff’s smiling face put Will at ease, “sorry I was in the kitchen, didn’t hear the ring. How was your flight?”

“The usual,” Will shrugged, “bad food and tight seats.”

“Sounds about right,” he said with a short laugh, “you want Elle? She’s in the living room, hang on I’ll take you through.”

Will watched as the room on the laptop tipped as Jeff lifted it, carrying it through the house until the diagonal perspective of two children on a sofa watching television came into view. On seeing the computer coming Eleanor looked up, eyes wide.

“Hey hon,” he could hear Jeff say, “wanna speak to your dad?”

“Yeah,” she said excitedly, getting up as the picture finally stopped moving, placed down on what Will assumed was the coffee table. Elle’s face wobbled into view, her big eyes not seeming to know where to look, “hi daddy!”

“Hey pumpkin,” Will waved, “how are you?”

“We’re watchin’ c-c-cartoons,” she said, eyes looking up where Will assumed the TV was, “it’s spaze-spah...”

“Spacerace, dummy,” Will heard Anthony’s voice from off-screen.

“I know what it’s called, Ant-on-ee!” she practically shouted.

“Hey, Elle, hey come on don’t shout,” Will said loudly, “you’re a guest in his house. Be nice.”

Ever since the results of her test had come back from the Dynamics department Elle had been developing a worrying superiority complex which Will was taking pains to temper. He could have murdered Miss Jenny for filling her head full of garbage about class systems. She’d even taken to bossing Anthony around, convinced that her (only just registered) alpha status gave her free reign to order around the betas. Will just hoped that she wasn’t doing the same thing to Milo. The man was too accommodating and he knew how worried Will was about her. Will knew Milo would let her away with anything.

“I know what it’s called,” she huffed, pouting; Will’s throat clenched, “daddy are you coming home? We’re havin’ crab cakes.”

“Not tonight. Two days and I’ll be back, I swear.”

“Ok-ay,” she said, voice small, fiddling with the keys on the laptop, eyes looking away, her mouth hanging open a little, “will you be home tomorrow?”

Will smiled, unable to help himself, “no, not tomorrow honey. Friday. I’ll try and be home by Friday.”

“Ok-ay,” she said again, rubbing clumsily at her cheek.

“You be good for me, ok? Be nice to Anthony and Mr.Milo.”

“I will.”

“Good girl. I’ll see you real soon.”

“Bye daddy.”

“Bye.”

The room seemed cold and quiet with the connection closed. Will realised it had slipped to late evening without him noticing. The room was painted in shadows, the last of the sun throwing a brazen orange glow onto the walls. Will lay back and looked at the ceiling once more.

After a few minutes there was a knock. He took the scotch and tipped the woman, hoping it hadn’t been the woman from the phone. Pouring himself an unhealthy helping into a deep tumbler, Will sat before his laptop and opened Crawford’s reports.

One by one.

Her words were cold and clinical and entirely realistic. Come to Baltimore, interview Lecter. She hadn’t minced her words, which he was begrudgingly grateful for. Most of the people Jack sent to badger him were less agents and more politicians, always thinking of an ingenious new way to ask the same thing over and over. Starling was refreshingly pragmatic and blunt. Will appreciated that.

The sounds of the cd player in the bedroom were faint as the coffee percolator bubbled. Some cheap compilation of stories he’d bought Elle in a supermarket last year, playing nursery-simple tunes behind an overly dramatic voice-over. Agent Starling, looking out of place at his shabby dining table in her neat suit, didn’t comment. Will didn’t upset the apple cart. If she wanted to pretend this was all perfectly normal then he’d go along with that. She had outlined the case, one he'd already read about in the papers even down in Key Largo. Still, he had made it plain that he understood why she was here.

Because for Will Graham it was not about choosing to suffer, but suffering through a choice. He just wasn't sure, as he poured the painfully green Agent Starling a bitter cup of black coffee in his Florida kitchenette, whether this particular choice would be painful or affirming.

"And what exactly makes you think I'll be any help?" he asked.

"Because you know him better than anyone," she said, sipping politely, "and because, personally, I think you're the reason he ran in the first place."

He'd give her points for creativity, but as far as he was concerned she had a lot to learn about the inner workings and desires of Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

“That’s one way of interpreting it.”

“It was five days before his trial and you were only twenty blocks away, at St Martin’s hospital. It seems obvious why he made an escape attempt.”

“Oh,” Will said, raising his eyebrows sarcastically as he handed her the coffee, “so you’re in that camp, are you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You think he was coming to get me, right? Escape, grab me, fly off into the sunset? I’m guessing you also think he was putting the knife down too.”

“You don’t?” Starling asked, a slight frown creasing her perfectly smooth forehead.

“There were seven armed SWAT officers and an FBI HoD pointing guns at us in our kitchen,” Will said, “I didn’t exactly have time to think about whether he was putting the knife down or getting ready to slit my throat.”

“But you have since then, surely.”

“I don’t think you came all this way just to get my opinion on that, did you?” Will asked acidly, “Unless Chilton sent you. Frederick Chilton?”

“I’ve met him,” she nodded.

“He has about a thousand dollars resting on nurture, not nature.”

“I’ve heard,” she nodded, “I read his paper. Positing that Dr. Lecter was hard wired to turn into what he was, but that his marriage and bonding to you changed that. It was compelling reading.”

“I’m sure it was,” Will said.

“It is true that out of the thirty five murders he was eventually convicted of, none were performed after he met you.”

“Sorry, did you come here to dig up my private life or did you want my opinion on something?”

“Actually these are relevant questions,” Starling said, po-faced, “it’s important for me to understand your relationship. I’ll be in the interview with you, I have to be able to read the subtleties in his inflections, body language, eye contact.”

“No,” Will took a long sip of coffee and shook his head.

“No?” she asked, frowning.

“You can’t be there. No one can be there. If I’m talking to Hannibal I’m doing it alone.”

“Mr. Graham...”

“Will, please.”

“...Will,” she nodded, “that isn’t an option.”

“Try telling that to Dr. Lecter.”

“He understands the parameters.”

“No, he understands how far he can push you. Little by little. Let me guess, he’s already swindled something out of you. Italian poetry maybe, though it could be a set of charcoals?” Starling didn’t react, “No,” Will narrowed his eyes in thought, biting at his lip as he watched her, “he knows you’re desperate, he’ll have pushed for something difficult. Something that will have pissed Chilton off, so something messy. Self drying clay. He asked for clay, didn’t he.”

“...Yes, he did.”

“And you got it for him.”

“Yes, we did.”

“Mistake,” Will said harshly, “your first and hopefully your last. Let me put it this way, Agent Starling,” Will said, sitting down and talking sternly, “if you ever feel like you’re two steps ahead of Hannibal Lecter try looking up. He’ll be off to your left waiting to flank. If you think you’ve outsmarted him, tricked him, you’re always wrong. You’ve met him?”

She nodded strongly, “I have.”

“Then he knows you. Always remember that. He knows you better than you know you. Didn’t Jack tell you any of this?”

“He warned me Dr. Lecter has an incredibly keen mind and ability for memory, unlike any psychopath we’ve ever dealt with at the BAU.”

“That’s because he’s not a psychopath, not really, not in the clinical sense. He’s not crazy. He did some hideous things because he enjoyed them, because he liked it.”

“So if he’s not a psychopath then how would you define him?”

“I wouldn’t,” Will said, looking her in the eye, “I wouldn’t dare to. But you would, it seems. Be careful of that. Labels can be deceiving.”

She cleared her throat and took a drink of her coffee. A set of loud waves rolled onto the shore, a wake from someone’s speedboat no doubt, making the dogs bark. Will whistled, settling the barks to growls, then whines, then the sound of laughter as he heard Elle run through and start harassing the dogs. ‘Bad doggie!’ *she was calling,* ‘Bad doggies no barkin!’

“She’s a sweet kid,” Starling said with a small, tight smile, as if she didn’t know what to do with her mouth.

“How the hell would you know?” Will asked dryly, making Starling look away, frustrated.

“I suppose small talk is out of the question.”

“Jack really didn’t tell you anything about me, huh?”

“I’m starting to wish he’d given me a little more to go on, yes.”

“Typical fucking Crawford,” Will sat back in his chair and cradled his coffee, enjoying Starling’s seeming knee jerk reaction to defend her boss; she reigned it in, taking a drink from her mug instead, “throwing rookies in at the deep end. Did he pull you from training for this?”

“Yes, though I was only five weeks from my finals.”

“Shit,” Will shook his head, closing his eyes to rub at his eyelids, “Hannibal must have been disgusted.”

“Being interviewed by a rookie?” Starling sounded jadedly offended.

“No,” Will shook his head, “that Jack would send you into the lion’s den without even a knife to defend yourself. You can have all the theory in the world, Agent Starling, but it won’t save you the way experience and intuition can. Hannibal knows that. He isn’t fond of other people’s casual disregard for life.”

“Even after taking so many himself?”

“Oh,” Will smirked, “those weren’t casual. For Hannibal they were...necessary evils.”

“Then you have profiled him,” Starling said as if she had figured out something bizarre.

“Of course I have,” Will said, “he’s the father of my child. I’ve read the case reports. I’ve seen the crime scene photographs. Hell, I used to teach classes on the Chesapeake Ripper before we were married.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it fucking bothers me,” Will laughed; Starling looked at him like he might be mad, “but I loved him then. That always makes things difficult.”

“Past tense?” she asked, watching him bluntly.

“...Yeah,” Will replied quietly, turning his mug round and round in circles on the table, “past tense. Difficult to stay in love when your spouse cuts people in two for amusement.”

“Then you’ll join our investigation?” Starling changed the subject while not truly changing the subject; Will silently applauded her for pulling it off.

“If my neighbour can take Eleanor, then I’ll come with you,” Will nodded, “but I’m not joining the investigation. I’m coming up to speak to Hannibal for you, get you the information you need if I can, and that’s it. Not saying I’ll be able to either. Hannibal isn’t one to be played.”

“Then I’ll inform Jack,” she said, nodding, “may I use your phone? Mine is in the car.”

“Sure,” Will said with a sigh, handing over his mobile, “whatever you need.”

The room was warm and dark; not because of a lack of light, but more due to the dark wooden furnishings and wall plating, heavy curtains and low wattage bulbs. Will sank into his chair, uncaring of his slouch. Starling had already commented on his appearance when she arrived to pick him up at the hotel; *you look rough, get any sleep at all?* He hadn’t been able to answer her. It would have been too depressing.

Almost as depressing as being in this room, he thought. They had been there for all of ten minutes before Chilton began primping.

“I understand that you have already briefly met him, Agent Starling, and it may seem gratuitous to warn *you*, of all people, about Lecter,” he said to Will, “But I must impress upon you both that he’s very disarming. For a year after he was brought here he behaved perfectly and gave the appearance of co-operating with attempts at therapy. As a result – this was not under my advisement of course – security around him was relaxed.

“On the afternoon of July eighth, two thousand thirteen, he complained of chest pain. His restraints were removed in the examining-room to make it easier to give him an electrocardiogram. One of the attendants – now no longer employed here – went out for a smoke and the other turned away for merely a second,” Chilton paused here, as if for dramatic effect, “the nurse was very quick and strong. She managed to save one of her eyes.”

So far Will had only been half listening. He was too busy noticing how much lower his chair was than Chilton’s, giving the illusion of height and superiority. Also how the man displayed his diplomas on the walls either side of his chair, like flanking guards. Lastly that Chilton had something green stuck in his teeth, just within eyesight when the man smiled. Even for Will, who hated to stereotype, Chilton was a shining example of the underachieving beta who dreamed of wanting more. Wanting what his betters had. Bizarrely, he thought, wanting what Lecter had before his incarceration; power, influence and respect.

Will knew he was staring into space. Agent Starling was quiet. When Chilton didn’t get the reaction he expected he continued.

“You may find this curious,” he said, pulling a strip of EKG tape from the drawer and unrolling it on the desk. He tracked the spiky line with his forefinger, “Here, he’s resting on the examining-table. Pulse seventy two. Here, he grabs the nurse’s head and pulls her down on him. Here, he is subdued by the attendant. He didn’t resist by the way, though the attendant dislocated his shoulder. Do you notice the strange thing?”

Oh I notice the strange thing alright, Will thought as he stared at Chilton, and it's in the room with me right now.

"His pulse never got over eighty five," Chilton said, leaning back to steeple his fingers, "even when he tore out her tongue."

Will stayed blank. It wasn't difficult. If Chilton thought he was in any way intimidating or awe inspiring he was dead wrong. Truthfully Will was using the man as a calming exercise. He would need it before speaking to Lecter.

"So you've had sessions with Dr. Lecter?" Starling, seated next to him, was doing a good job of not sounding disturbed; he knew she was, utterly, but she was still doing a bang up job of keeping it professional. It made Will smile to see Chilton put out by their united front of apathy to his little anecdote.

"Yes," Chilton cleared his throat, "several. He's impenetrable. Too sophisticated about the tests for them to register anything."

"It's because he knows them all inside out," Will said, "no pun intended."

"How droll," Chilton said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "You see we're woefully short on a perspective on him. Edwards, Fabre, even Dr. Bloom has had a crack at him. He's an enigma to them too. In fact the consensus around here is that the only person with any practical understanding of Hannibal Lecter is you."

"What, because we lived together for a couple of years?" Will asked, unimpressed.

"I was thinking more of the bond you share," Chilton clarified as if it were obvious, "in fact it is not only Dr. Lecter we've been looking for a perspective on. I mean we're always looking for a fresh angle on male omega psychology, and yours is such a unique case that..."

"We really are here just for the official visit," Starling cut in when Will stayed quiet.

"Of course, of course," Chilton backed down with a short laugh that said he knew when he was being stonewalled, "Dr. Bloom was very severe with me on that point, when she heard you were visiting. We're to leave you alone. So be it," he paused before leaning forwards, arms crossed on his desk, speaking slowly, "but I am curious, just on this last point. Maybe you can help me. When you saw Dr. Lecter's murders, their 'style' so to speak, were you able to reconstruct his fantasies? Did you ever work out whether you were part of them? I've always wondered. The man appears to have the patience of a saint when it comes to planning the perfect act of violence. I wonder whether your aborted death that afternoon was to be a culmination of all the planning that had gone into marrying you, *bonding* with you even. What do you think, too obvious for his usual Machiavellian schemes?"

When he tasted blood Will realised he had bitten through the inside of his lip. The pain barely covered the spiralling fury churning in his gut. He thought, for a moment, that his vision might have dimmed. Will unclenched his jaw and looked to Agent Starling. She seemed to understand the situation; *if you don't get me out of here right now there'll be another murder to add to your spree.* She smiled demurely and stood up. Will followed her lead stiffly.

“Thank you for your time Dr. Chilton,” she said, “but we’d like to see Dr. Lecter now.”

They were led to an elevator, in which they went down with an escort. A silent man with greying hair, skin the colour of gritty coffee. Will felt as if he were descending into the bowels of something waiting to devour him. At the very least it put him further away from Chilton. It wasn’t a long ride but it was enough.

“I was upstairs,” he said while they waited for the doors to open, “when I was brought here. For a month.”

“I didn’t ask,” Starling said.

“No but you were thinking it.”

She didn’t reply. While Starling checked in her weapon with security Will stared through the glass plate in the heavy security door. The corridor beyond was stark white, so much so that it was difficult to see the delineations. *Enough to drive anyone mad,* he thought.

The steel door of the maximum security section closed behind them with a subtle boom. The bolt slid home. As they walked Will found himself wondering trivial things, such as if Hannibal still liked to sleep in. He’d always done so at home. Any chance he got he’d take the late shift at work, sleeping until lunchtime. *I’d make lunch and take it up*, Will thought, *open the curtains just to see him hide his eyes.*

He knew which cell was Lecter’s. Not because there were two chairs placed outside, but because of the pulling sensation in his gut as they walked closer. It hadn’t been noticeable until they got beyond the security door, but now his neck itched. His palms began to sweat. His breathing became difficult to control. By the time they reached the cell, dimmed to a dull light, he had to focus solely on how to put one foot in front of the other. When he deviated towards the bars he thought he heard Starling say something about “*behind the line!”* but he couldn’t stop himself.

He felt as if he were falling from a great height as he leaned against the bars on his right shoulder, his left hand grabbing the steel tightly. He ignored Starling, only barely stunned that she hadn’t hauled him bodily away from the bars. He was sure she was curious, at least a little, as to what Lecter would do. Will managed to clear his head by focusing on how momentarily sickened he was by her; she had heard Chilton’s anecdote too, after all.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter lay in his cot, eyes closed. His head was propped on a pillow against the wall. Alexandre Dumas’ *Le Grand Dictionaire de Cuisine* was open on his chest. Will knew he was not asleep. After a few seconds his eyes opened, staring upwards at the bland ceiling.

“That is atrocious aftershave,” he said.

“I keep getting it for Christmas,” Will quipped quietly, knowing he was understood; Elle had picked it out when he’d taken her to the department store. She’d liked it because there was a ship on the bottle.

When Hannibal rose from the bed it was with all the leanness of a predator. Will remembered when he'd seen nothing but grace in the man's movements. It was difficult to separate them now, his memories and the reality before him. As he approached Will found his eyes and held them. The wonderful maroon glittered in the strip lights from farther down the hall.

When the palm reached out through the bars and touched his face Will closed his eyes and sagged.

Oh god, he thought, *oh god I need-I need-I* need *you to...*

There was no place for shame in his mind. He did not think about Starling or the camera Chilton surely had trained on him, yet had not called the guards. Chilton was just as bad, surely willing to risk Will's safety for a chance to see their dynamic for himself. He did not care about anything much as he took hold of the hand and turned his face into the palm, drawing in the rich scent. It spiked straight up his spine, sending a myriad of intense and confusing signals to his brain. Everything tingled. *So long, so long, too long, far too long*. His body didn't seem to know what to do with itself. Part of him wished to calmly walk to his chair and sit down. The other half wished to crush itself through the bars until it could be gathered into his alpha's welcoming arms and drag in the heady scent he knew would be strongest at Hannibal's neck where the gland secreted the desirous smell.

Instead he had to make do with the wrist of his right hand, running his nose across the sensitive flesh there. *Hot and slightly bitter with a perfumed edge, like cloves in aspic.* He felt the fingers of Hannibal's hand twitch against his cheek.

Will tore away with the intensity of an attack, as if his logical mind had simply pulled his emotions out by the socket. His footsteps were rigid as he walked to his chair, ignoring Starling and ignoring the chill of absolute repulsion that ran along his shoulders, both from Lecter's touch and Will's own inability to resist. He sat down and sorted his jacket. He could feel Hannibal's eyes on him.

Then a small, decorous laugh emanated from the cell. Will cleared his throat and look straight ahead, avoiding Lecter's eyes.

"Dear Will," he said with dry humour, "how I have missed you."

The Mirror in her Eyes

Chapter Notes

For those who have read 'Red Dragon', I am trying to rework the story but also keep it true to the original. I hope it doesn't get bogged down in it too much, but I hope it'll make sense later on.
Also for those who know Hannibal's origin story, the fairy tale may make a lot of sense...

Thank you again to everyone for your kind words and the lovely kudos.

Starling left them alone on the strict understanding that Will would not be reckless enough to go beyond the line again. He was beginning to wonder how much free reign Crawford had given her, or if he had simply told Starling to give Will the free reign (to a reasonable extent). Of course leaving them alone didn't seem reasonable, but then Will knew it was difficult for others to understand.

The black stripe upon the grey floor sat starkly, a good three feet from the bars. A two dimensional interpretation of a three dimensional barrier. It seemed entirely ineffectual. A line. When had a line ever stopped anyone determined to cross it? Will stared at it as he listened to the door boom closed. Bolt shut.

He could feel Hannibal watching him.

It was difficult not to relax under his gaze, even as his skin crawled. The air changed. Will thought he could still feel the latent humour emanating from Hannibal as he tipped his head and folded his hands in his lap.

Grass tickling the back of his neck as he laughed, laying half under Hannibal's reassuring weight, staring up at the clouds, the man whispering into his ear with humour lacing his voice, '...would you? How ravishing. I didn't know you appreciated such exhibitionism...'

Blinking shuttered the memory from view. The bars and the cell and the perfect sketches on the walls and the maroon eyes in the gloom and the cage of the Asylum phased back in. His heart was drumming in a peculiar pattern. Hannibal was somehow managing to look casual in his prison blues; a jumpsuit working as a three piece suit. Will was staring, he knew it. Hannibal swallowed attractively, looking down along his nose, the slim line of his eyes resting on Will's knees.

"Then it seems I should start," Hannibal said after another few moments of nothing but manoeuvring themselves while barely moving at all. He sat down next to his small desk. Will could see the clay there, wrapped carefully in a thick, plastic sheet and tied off with material

strips. Beside it sat a small clay figure, half hidden, indistinguishable. Will's eyes didn't linger.

"I am glad you came," he continued, "And it's been what now, three years? My callers have been profusely professional for so long now. Banal clinical psychiatrists and grasping, second rate doctors of psychology from silo colleges somewhere. Pencil lickers trying to protect their tenure with articles in the journals."

Will forced himself to analyse Lecter's words, so as to avoid being riled by them. So many knives hidden in a simple few sentences. A stab at Will's want to leave the BAU to pursue an academic career. A blatant disregard for their connection and their history together. A refusal to seem in any way put out by the fact that he had been caught and sentenced and was never going to leave this facility for as long as he lived. *Still arrogant, still charmingly aloof, still superior, still self-important, still starved for attention.*

Will left a minute's silence before looking up from the floor, finding Hannibal's eyes. They were still trained on him intently.

Two could play at that game.

"Dr. Bloom emailed me your article on surgical addiction in *The journal of Clinical Psychology*."

"Ah yes, Alana," Hannibal moved into the change in conversation easily, sitting back and crossing his legs, "one of the few visitors I can stand. She is wonderfully intelligent, if somewhat naive. What did you think of it?"

"The article?" *I wanted to hate myself for reading it*, he thought, "Interesting. Probably for all the wrong reasons."

"You wound me. Or am I to take that as morbid curiosity on your part? Have you been having problems, Will?"

"No."

"Of course you haven't."

He had to keep control of the conversation, but with Lecter that was almost impossible. He'd had a hard enough time when they'd been a couple. Of course back then he hadn't realised it was such a competition, "I'm not here to reminisce. I'm sure you understand that."

"Uncle Jack," Hannibal said as if to himself, finding Will's eyes and holding them, "Such a clever little bloodhound."

"We need your help."

"*You* need my help."

"...I need your help. Yes. I need your help. I'm sure you've been reading the papers?"

“Atlanta and Birmingham. Two little nuclear families wiped from the face of the earth. You want to know how he’s choosing them.”

“Your insight would be invaluable.”

“Of course. They won’t let me take clippings, from the newspapers. No scissors, you understand.”

“I could get you access, to the AMA film strip library.”

“I’m not sure you’d be able to get the things I like.”

A warm arm around his back as he lay against Hannibal’s side, legs curled on the sofa, his left hand flowing over Hannibal’s chest, rumpling the shirt there, ‘You don’t even like Kurosawa? Hannibal you’re the snob’s snob. I’m going to find a movie you like if it kills me’. A hand at the back of his neck, stroking down across the top of his spine, as Hannibal spoke with humour, ‘And you are my cultural ambassador. Would you pass my wine?’

When times had been easier simply because they were true. Now that they were lies it was harder to swallow. It caused a strange disconnect; Will remembered so many things about Hannibal, *his likes, his dislikes, his sense of humour, his habits, so many more,* which he had to remind himself were not real.

Will brought it back to the reason he was there. *Don’t lose focus,* he thought.

“He likes to make art. He thinks about it, plans it through, it’s not just mindless. I thought you might appreciate each other. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Very tricky business he’s dealing in, this particular tiger, wiping out the family lifestyle. Appreciate? Hmm. Perhaps not the right word,” Hannibal didn’t elaborate, “I can imagine it is something *you* do not appreciate.”

The little girl swinging, holding tight to her mom and dad’s hands as they lifted her from the ground. Will had watched them till they walked out of sight, his skin itching with sweat from his run, his throat sore from the slight chill in the air. It had been so sudden he wasn’t sure if it was rational or not, so sudden and unexpected. That beautiful, effortless happiness. Never, he’d thought, he’d never wanted something so much in all his...

Now, back in the present, Will knew the fantasy was always able to shatter, no matter how perfect. The Leeds hadn’t known that, nor had the Jacobis. They would understand now, if they weren’t resting on cold slabs or buried in the ground. He’d seen what was left of their neat little family units.

The world slowly came back into view. Hannibal was watching him as if he were a mildly interesting program he’d turned onto by mistake and decided to watch, see what came of it, before inevitably turning off, “I thought you would have some ideas about him, can you tell me what they are?”

“I’ve just been given my favourite, do you remember?” Lecter ignored him smoothly, “I’m sure you do. You bought it for me, if I recall rightly, for my forty sixth birthday. *Italian Poetry Since World War Two, November nineteen eighty nine*. A double issue.”

“He’s progressing, slowly but surely getting his confidence up. The next one isn’t going to be so pretty. I thought maybe you’d mind about that.”

“You bought mine in a second hand store,” Lecter continued, “The corners of the cover were curled. The effusive Agent Starling was good enough to include it in her bundle of tricks. I am enjoying it.”

“He’s not an artist like you are. I wouldn’t teach classes on him. He won’t be worth studying when he’s caught,” Will knew he was pushing it.

“I think...Primo Levi. Yes, he is what I’d had in mind for you. *Twenty fifth of February, nineteen forty four*. How does it go? I would like to believe in something...”

“Dr Lecter...”

“Something beyond the death that undid you,” Hannibal said, tipping his head slightly to the right; the words stole Will’s ability to think straight, cutting deeply into his skin like fishhooks, barbs sinking deep, “I would like to describe the intensity with which, already overwhelmed, we longed in those days to be able to walk together once again. Free beneath the sun.”

The death that undid you. Will took a deep breath through his nose and held it, letting it out slowly as he stared at a particular bar with a black mark half way up its centre. The most cruel of taunts and the most distasteful, he thought, it was almost below Hannibal. It would have been, he was sure, if the man wasn’t able to transmit it using the pretentious media of obscure poetry.

Or is it a consolation? His mind supplied unhelpfully. Will refused to think on it. Because believing that Hannibal would console him on Charlotte’s death would lead to believing that he no longer deserved to be in that cell.

That he had no longer wished to kill while they were bonded.

That, on that sunny afternoon three years ago, he was putting the knife down.

Free beneath the sun. Part of him was rabid to believe it, the implication. The other was too jaded to Lecter’s tricks to entertain the notion.

Will moved in his chair, sliding down slightly and crossing his legs at the ankles. With his right hand he absently trailed along the exposed edge of the pages in the folder Starling had left on the seat next to him. Then he linked his fingers together.

“You’ve been told then.”

“She was my child. It would have been unlawful to keep it from me. Even Chilton, boor that he is, understands the laws which will inconvenience him.”

Will imagined putting his arm around Chilton's neck, holding it as the man struggled and puffed and gasped, before snapping it. He licked his lips and allowed the thought its dark consolation. When he refocused on Hannibal the man was smiling.

"Where did you go Will? You looked a million miles away."

"It'll always be the case," Will's smile was thin.

"You are not far from me now."

"I think this is far enough," Will said, waving his hand forward to indicate the short distance between them.

"You were not so far earlier on," Hannibal pointed out with warm eyes. Will shivered involuntarily, "I had almost forgotten the feel of your skin. It is different to how I remember. It makes me wish to peruse you as I once had the right to. Is the scar still pink on your right thigh, I wonder? Such a wonderful blemish, it intrigued me."

"The way this man intrigues you?" Will tried to bring the conversation back to the killer he was hunting, but he knew it was clumsy. He was allowing Lecter to make him desperate to steer their interaction.

"Intrigue is such an umbrella term."

"You would be able to see the case notes, photographs, reports, everything."

"You are very tanned, Will."

The smile widened and Will felt his chest clench. It had been the clinch point, the moment he knew would come but hadn't known how to deal with. It could have been any time that the point hit home. The part of him that was purely overjoyed to be in Hannibal's presence curled in pain. The part that wished he were a thousand miles away, picking Ellie up from school, felt it too. *He never felt a thing, all that time, he never felt a thing. He was waiting, just waiting, for a chance to see what it would be like to kill you...*

Will couldn't reply, because his mouth had been sewn shut with grief.

"Your hands," Hannibal sat forwards, leaving his ankles crossed, "not an academic's hands any longer. Rough and weathered; a labourer's disposition. You were always fond of machinery. And that offensive smell! Something a child would choose, and something a parent couldn't decline. How is my daught..?"

"My daughter," Will interrupted on instinct, wishing that he had more control when Lecter held his stare, "and she's fine."

"I am sure she is, with you looking after her. May I see her?"

"I don't carry a picture."

"Removed from your wallet for my benefit?"

“I don’t carry her picture,” Will pressed, “are you going to tell me what you think or aren’t you?”

“Not even some more pointless bargaining before you put your foot down? You’re ruining the little fantasy. I have been waiting for this moment, the least you could do is play along. Did you get my letters? Only you never reply.”

Waking up screaming in the dark, clutching his stomach as he hitched out breath, mouth open but no sound escaping, throat straining, eyes crushed shut. A broken moment in the night as a baby’s cry began to ring out through the stillness. Hauling in breath was painful and loud, harsh and throaty. Enough breath in his lungs to scream again, curling inwards, closing down, the dream clawing, clinging, remembering the pain coloured by a calming hand as the doctor spoke calm and clear, ‘the stress and hormone deficiency in your early pregnancy caused the uterus to deform. The second foetus was pushed out of the way, causing the high risk of complications. I’m so sorry, Mr Graham, if we’d realised sooner...’ clawing at the sheets as he heard Eleanor crying in her cot, wishing and wishing that there was another crying beside her, wishing there were warm arms reaching from behind to pull him back, hold him close. Wishing nothing more than to die.

Somehow, in the minute that he was silent, Hannibal had begun to look distinctly familiar. Less the smug, aloof prisoner, more the same stoic face he would hold when something upset Will greatly. Impenetrable, and yet with a strangled warmth in the eyes that seemed to wish nothing more than to take that pain away, crush it from existence. Briefly, Will wondered how much the bond was affecting Hannibal at this close proximity to his mate, and how much was truly the man’s intention.

Then he stopped thinking about it.

“You haven’t been waiting for this moment,” Will smiled, shark-like, his eyes remaining cold and hurt, “you god damned liar.”

With that he stood up, retrieved the case-notes folder and walked off. Hannibal did not call after him.

“I’ll lie on my, wait-no give me a second.”

“I had thought this might be easier from behind.”

“We’re going to be like this for a while, so if you want to kneel for hours that’s perfectly up to- not there, wrong one!”

“Apologies.”

“Finally, I find something you’re bad at and it’s the one thing I need you to be good at.”

“You wound my ego daily, dear Will. This is not something I have practiced. Oh, you are...I see. Then shall I..?”

“Yes, there, facing me I think...like this?”

“It seems acceptable. Give me your leg.”

A laugh, “You’re taking all the romance out of it.”

A smile, “Then allow me to woo you. Like this, put your knee-yes, now...”

“Oh god,” a hissed breath, “Shit, Hannibal...”

“You are already wet?”

“We’ve been rolling around on this bed naked for twenty minutes trying to get this right, of course I’m wet.”

The smile widened, “Then you’re making this easy for me,” a kiss, “now look at me.”

“Look at you? That’s fucking embarrass-jesus! Ah. Ah! Wait!”

A frown, “Am I hurting you?”

“No, no. Wait,” panted breath, “Please. Yes, yes it hurts. I’ll be fine, just give a minute.”

“A minute may be all I can bare.”

A hand to smack his arm smartly, “who’s the one getting the most out of this, huh? Oh, ah, don’t move. You-you’re,” a half grin, half grimace, “going to suffer through this just as much as me.”

“Time with you is never a sufferance.”

“I hope you mean that in the archaic sense.”

“Don’t I always?”

“You can...you can move, if you want.”

“You are sure?”

“I want you to, like...oh god, yes. Like that.”

“Slow? I will do my best.”

“Mmm. Hannibal? Touch me, can you-ah! There.”

“So sensitive.”

“Look w-who’s talking.”

The slip of a hand, "Oh. Well," panted breath, a groan, "I see you are devious."

"You knew that when you married me."

"Part of why I did so, yes," eyes on him, "look at you. If you could see yourself...show me your neck."

An aborted groan, "What?"

A hand in his hair, fingers tight, "Bare your neck to me."

"Fuck I love it when you get like this," a whine, a neck bared.

Teeth scraping sensitive flesh, "I would not hurt you. Not for all the world. You're mine. You belong to me."

"Christ," closed eyes, "oh Christ. Too fast, wait-"

"Quiet. Be quiet. Do not move or..."

"Shit. Sorry. I thought if we were facing you wouldn't slip."

"Here," a gasp, a fumbling hand, "is this right?"

"Jesus yes. Yes it's right. Deeper. God you're close."

"I will blame you for my performance issues," a silence broken only by panted breaths, "are you ready to..?"

"Been ready for hours. Do it. Fucking do it Hannibal, fuck, yes, yes..! *Ah! Oh fuck, oh fuck. Bite me, do it!"*

Blood, skin broken, the taste on both their tongues. The air filled with breathless gasps. A pause. A sound of disquiet.

"I have been warned it can be uncomfortable."

"Oh yeah? Who the hell were you-ah, no, ah. *Yes, please, like that. Just stay still," slowed breathing, closed eyes to compose, "What was I..? Right. Who the hell were you talking to about this?"*

"A colleague. A surgeon. She said knotting wasn't as pleasant as the rest of the ordeal."

"If she called it an ordeal I doubt any of it was pleasant for her."

"And this?"

"Well it's...different," smothered into a neck, a tongue to lap the blood, "think I prefer it when you just do me, to be honest."

"Will."

“You asked,” a pause, a groan, a strange feeling, a frown, “oh that’s...now that’s strange. Are you still, you know..?”

“I believe insemination takes up to four hours.”

“Again, romance is dead.”

“I am unsure as to how I could make that in the least romantic.”

“Fair point,” eyes closed, arms around his back, pulled close, “mmm. I can feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“You making me alive. We’re making a life together. Somehow that seems odd.”

“Such a natural thing is odd to you?”

“I never thought I’d get the chance, or even want to,” a hand pushed hair from a sweaty forehead, leaning back, eyes met, “did you?”

A long pause, “No. No I did not think it would be something I’d ever consider.”

“Why not?”

“A conversation for another time, perhaps.”

“Another time? I don’t think you get much more intimate than this, Hannibal. You’re going to be inside me for the next four hours. Might as well talk about something.”

“It is not a happy topic.”

“Oh. Ok. Sorry.”

“No. You were not to know.”

“Alright,” a kiss, pulling back, another kiss, deeper, “then what would you like to talk about?”

“Hmm,” a smile, “after all that preparation and we forgot to consider our options,” a pause, a contemplation, “...maybe I could tell you a story.”

“Tell me a story?” a laugh.

“Inappropriate?”

“Only if it’s a story about disastrous sex. Or botched surgery.”

“It is not. Also I do not perform botched surgeries.”

“I was kidding. Alright. You’ve intrigued me.” huddled closer, a face pushed against a shoulder, a contented sigh.

“Then I shall endeavour to entertain you. Once upon a time...”

“This is a ‘once upon a time’ story? Now I do feel dirty.”

“Will.”

“Sorry,” a chuckle, “keep going.”

“Once upon a time there was a little boy, and he liked to run. He and his sister lived in a big house in the countryside with their mother and father and all their servants. The servants liked the boy and called him ‘bėgikas’, it means ‘runner’. Beside them grew a great wood and, beyond that a tall mountain the locals called pasakų pilis...”

“Pas-what?”

“It means fairy castle. They called it so because it was tall and broad, flat topped with tall cliffs, knotted and pitted like thousands of windows. Now, every day the little boy ran. Through the forest, to the base of the mountain and through the foothills. Never up the mountain. His mother had warned, ‘the fairies steal children who stray on the mountain’ and their family must remain hidden from them. The little boy was afraid. He would not set foot upon it, though its top looked so lush and beautiful. He could see trees and waterfalls running down from above. His little sister said that it looked like it would be a paradise.”

“Could you pass the water? Ah, careful.”

A complicated stretch, “Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Where was I? Ah yes. Then, one day, his parents were pre-occupied and the little boy was fed up running in the woods and foothills. His father was a great architect and his mother a fine pianist. The little boy went to his father in his study as he drew on great sheets of paper. ‘Father’ he said, ‘I have run through the woods and I have seen all it has to offer. I have seen the hollows and the animals and the glades. May I go upon the mountain?’. ‘No’ he was told, ‘only foolish children stray upon the mountain. You will anger them and bring great evil here. No one must know where we are. Go and play in the garden with your good sister’.”

“I can see this ending badly.”

“You are astute. The boy was very angry. He went to his mother. ‘Mother’ he said, ‘I have run through the foothills of the mountain. I have seen the deer in their herds and seen the eagles overhead and searched the gullies for mushrooms. May I go upon the mountain?’. ‘No,’ he was told, ‘only foolish children stray upon the mountain. You will anger them and bring great evil upon us. No one must know where we are. Go and play in the garden with your good sister’.

“The boy was furious. His parents never had time for him. Always they expected him to be running free upon the land, but never was he allowed to go further than their estate. Never was he allowed to go upon the mountain and see the beautiful fairy land hidden on its top.

The boy went to the garden and played with his dear sister. She was fair and innocent, and had no ambitions beyond their quiet life and the love of her family. Sometimes the little boy envied her, but he loved her more than life itself, so he forgave her naivety.

"Then, that night, the little boy slipped out of his bed. He took a torch, a map and some bread from the scullery. He stole from the house and he ran through the forest. He knew his way so well he was not scared of the dark. He ran through the foothills. He knew his way so well that he did not need to look at the map. He climbed and he scaled and he found his way onto the plateau. And when he reached the top..! Ah, what beauty.

"There were lights all through the sky, floating upon delicate strings above a great lake, flanked on three sides by wondrous cliffs. Inside the cliffs were millions of lights, tiny fairy homes lit up like stars. Upon the lake sat all manner of fairies, playing songs and eating berries, chasing each other to and fro. They danced and they played and they made wonderful music. The boy sneaked among them and listened and watched. He longed to play with them, but remembered his parent's warning. However, as with all children, after a time he could not resist. There were three fairies dancing in a ring and the boy, leaping from the bushes, began to dance with them.

A feeling of discomfort, "Hannibal..."

"And all of a sudden the lights went out and the fairies scattered and a terrible sound could be heard. A terrible, grumbling, roaring sound. And the little boy ran, all the way back down the mountain, through the foothills, through the forest."

A feeling of sickness, "Hannibal, are you alright?"

"But by then it was too late. The great evil had followed the boy back to his home, with his mother and his father and his good sister and all their servants. And it rolled on great treads and roared like a terrible troll. And it was filled with evil goblins who had lived on the mountain."

A feeling of great sorrow, "Wait..."

"And the little boy found his mother first. Dead on the floor of her music room, eyes like glass. His father next, nailed to the tree in the beautiful garden as an example. And the goblins rounded up all the servants and the boy and his good sister. And, one by one, they ate them. The boy and his good sister watched the group grow smaller and smaller, until only they remained. And when the goblins returned the boy threw himself at their feet and begged their forgiveness. But they were without hearts to feel his sorrow, without hearts with which to give pity. So they took his sister and locked the door behind them. And when the king's men finally arrived, they found the boy alone. The goblins were gone. All that remained were bones."

A sob.

"Will?"

"Oh god," another sob, "why are you..? You're upset. Why are you so upset?"

“I did not mean to...”

“No, I-I don’t know why I’m...I’m sorry, it’s just...I can feel it, like it’s my own. You’re hurt.”

“I am fine.”

“You can’t lie to me. Please don’t lie to me, not now.”

“We will talk of it later.”

“Damn it, why do you always do this?” sniffing, wiping angrily at eyes, “god, this is so strange. I’m not used to this.”

“Shall I tell you how the boy took his revenge?”

“No. Please. No more goblins devouring children. Something happy. Tell me about something happy?”

“As you wish,” a smile, a clearing of his throat, “Once upon a time, there was a morose young man who was determined to be alone. Then, one day, he met a dashing, handsome prince...”

A sob turned to a muted laugh, “Hannibal...”

“How else would you describe our first meeting?”

“You’re a prick, you know that?”

“Maybe we should get some rest.”

“Maybe,” a pause, “hey.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“What brought that on?”

“I just wanted to say it. I don’t...say it often. In fact I’m not sure I’ve ever said it.”

“You did not need to say it.”

“It seemed like the right time. You’re still upset. Why did you tell me that story if it upsets you so badly?”

“You wished to know.”

“What?”

“Another time,” a smile, “another time, remember? Let us talk of this another time.”

“You want to go to Atlanta?” Starling asked the next day; she was using her blank mask once more, determined not to give away her feelings through her features.

“Yeah, I want to go to Atlanta,” Will said as they sat outside the hotel in her rental car.

“What exactly do you plan to do there?”

“I need to see the Leeds crime scene. Photographs, reports, all that is fine but...I need to see it. If I’m going to help I need to walk through it. It’s just...what I do.”

The street was busy, cars passing slowly in a log jam of traffic, honked horns and people shouting. The smell of gasoline fumes floated through the window. Will wound it up and blew his nose on his handkerchief.

“So,” Starling said, “you changed your mind.”

“Yeah.”

“Because you think you failed with Lecter, so now you’re going to what? Catch this guy for us to make up for it?”

“Wow, pull your punches for all the new guys?” Will asked dryly.

“Sorry. It’s been a stressful week.”

“Don’t mention it. I know exactly how you feel,” Will rubbed at his forehead, “look, Hannibal was never going to be that much help. He won’t help because he doesn’t want to. He appreciates other killers, he likes their-how should I put it..?”

“Ingenuity?”

“Savagery. But ingenuity as well. There has to be an artistry to it. He wants this guy to keep killing. He won’t help us, no matter what you offer him.”

“Even when it’s you?” she asked, dead pan.

“Even when it’s me,” Will admitted, “in fact I’m sure he’s just happy that this is fucking me up. I’m sure he thinks that’s damn amusing.”

Starling didn’t comment. Will felt awkward. He wasn’t used to being around strangers. Milo was the only person he’d really had proper conversations with since he’d moved to Florida. His wife Susan was nice, though he knew she resented him a little. Milo was just an affable guy, enough that Will found he could tell him anything. After everything that had happened between them, Will felt he at least owed Milo that much.

“I can get you the two thirty flight with me. Priority. As far as your badge goes...”

“Jack can deal with that.”

“Alright. Then I guess you should pack.”

“Already done. I didn’t unpack.”

“Crawford was right,” Starling said as Will made to leave the car.

“What?”

“You are efficient,” it didn’t sound like a compliment, even in Starling’s pragmatic tone.

“So he did tell you about me,” Will smiled dryly.

Calling home was the hardest part. Will didn’t even bother with using the video phone. He’d rather not have to school his face as well as his voice. As he grabbed his bags and checked out he called Milo’s mobile.

“Finished already? That was quick,” the voice on the other end greeted, a grin in his tone; Will felt a lump in his throat.

“Hey Mi-Jeff. Sorry, uh, bad time?”

“No it’s fine. We’re just at the store. *No Elle, let me speak to your dad for a minute ok?*”

“Listen, I won’t take long. I just needed to ask you a favour.”

There was a pause. The sounds of squeaky shopping carts wheels and the background hubbub of voices. Will started to feel awkward.

“Hello?”

“I’m here,” Milo said, though it was obvious he was angry, “you’re not coming back.”

“I...I have to stay a couple of extra days. Things didn’t work out the way I thought they would. Lecter didn’t play ball.”

“You knew he wouldn’t,” Will thought he could hear Anthony’s high pitched voice in the background, and perhaps Elle’s too, “but that’s not why you went right? You promised yourself you weren’t going to get drawn into this.”

“I know I did, I know but...he’s taking families Jeff. Whole damn families and we don’t even know how he’s choosing them, let alone where he is, who he is. Crawford’s got the bare minimum to go on and...shit,” he looked up to see Starling picking up one of his bags, taking it to the car; her message was obvious, “I have to go.”

“What? Will wait...”

“I have to go. Please, just watch her for a few more days. I’ll be back real soon.”

“Won’t you say hi to her at least?”

“I have to go. Tell her I love her for me?”

"...Christ. This isn't ok, you know, this isn't alright."

"I know that too."

"Look, Will? Be safe. For her sake. Don't do anything stupid."

"I can't promise anything," he tried to joke; it fell flat.

"Hey honey?" Susan asked as she dried the dishes, "Have you had a chance to speak to Anthony's teacher yet?"

Standing on the back porch, Jeff Milo rubbed at his forehead and tried to ease the ache in his shoulders. It had been a long day, longer than usual, and he wasn't in the mood to have another argument. All day, back and forth, he'd been fighting with the Institute over funding for his latest project. Camille Nargo, the fiscal manager, was a god damned asshole as far as he was concerned. And now, at home, all he was getting was more strife.

"No, not yet," he called inside.

"Jeff," that tone made his hackles rise, "you promised you'd do it last week. If we don't get in quickly, all the best spots are going to be taken and Anthony's left out. This is our son's education we're talking about."

"I'll do it tomorrow, ok? I've had a lot on," Jeff took a long drink of his beer and stared at the ocean; the long, still slope of the water calmed him, even as the pain in his shoulders lanced.

"Yeah, well so have I. Don't make out this is my fault. You're not the only one being stonewalled at work. Jilly's omega team always get their funding first and I'm left in the dust."

"Don't be classist Susan," he berated.

"Oh that's rich," he heard her say as she walked to the back door; Jeff heard a sound and looked down the beach, seeing their new neighbour out on his porch. Jesus, guy looks drunk, Jeff thought derisively. He'd seen him move in a couple of weeks ago, alone but for some sparse furniture. Susan said she'd tried to go round and say hi but no one answered the door, "hey, don't try and get out of this by just keeping quiet."

"I'm not getting out of anything, why do you always say that?" Jeff bit back, frowning; in his peripheral vision he saw their neighbour lurch down to the beach, his stride long and determined, if somewhat unsteady.

"Because you always try and weasel out of shit, that's why," Susan said, irritated.

"Christ you like to over exaggerate."

“You know what Jeff?” she looked over her shoulder to make sure Anthony wasn’t in earshot, “fuck you.”

“Is that how it is? Well fuck me then, yeah? Because...” then his voice slid away to nothing. He heard Susan asking him what was wrong. All he had the time to breathe, in pure shock, was , “...oh Jesus Christ.”

Because the shape of the man that he’d seen walk down onto the beach was in the water. Because the shape in the water didn’t stop. Because as the shape of his head slipped under the calm, easy waves, Jeff knew it wasn’t going to come back up. Then he was running, because it was all he could think to do. It was all he could comprehend. The sand was still warm from the sunny day, now filtering into late evening, and it puffed up in great clouds beneath his feet. He stumbled, rolled, got up, ran again.

He could hear Susan calling frantically after him. His muscles ached. When he ran into the water it was a shock how cold it was for the time of year. It dragged at him. He slowed. There was no sign of the man, no sign at all.

“Jeff. Oh my god Jeff!” he heard his wife calling.

Then he was under the water. The salt bit at his eyes but he had no choice. The evening light was no good beneath the water, murky and cloudy. He swept out with his arms and kicked with his legs. The water cooled the further he got. He looked about him. Nothing. He pulled to the right. Nothing there.

He was a strong swimmer, had always been a strong swimmer, but the sprint down the beach had stolen his breath. His chest burned. About to kick back to the surface he caught sight of something dark in the water.

Suspended as if in jelly, the figure of the man was gloomy, arms drooped out in front of him, clothes floating upon his frame, eyes closed; sinking. It was instinct to swim for him even though his body scream for air. Jeff grabbed him awkwardly around the torso and kicked his legs. The man was heavy in his clothes, t-shirt and jeans.

When they broke the surface Jeff gasped harshly, hauling air into his lungs. He could hear Susan on the shore as he swam backwards, dragging the man with him. When his feet hit the ground he felt it was worse. No longer suspended by the water the man was a dead weight. Jeff picked him up and carried him, difficult with his slippery skin and sodden clothes. The adrenaline running high in his bloodstream helped. He felt like he could lift a car, his heart going a mile a minute.

“Is he ok? Is he breathing?” Susan asked frantically as Jeff slumped to his knees, putting the man down as carefully as he could.

“Don’t know,” Jeff panted, “get a blanket. From the house, get a blanket.”

“Ok,” she ran off, slender feet sinking in the sand.

He checked his mouth; nothing. His pulse; nothing. Jeff panicked.

“Oh no, oh fuck no,” he whispered, rolling the man onto his back; he was pale, whorls of brown hair plastered to his forehead. There was no time to think. He took a deep breath, pinched the man’s nose and covered his mouth with his own. One long, steady breath in, move to the side to refill, then another long slow breath filling still, unresponsive lungs. Then one, two, three, four savage pumps to the chest, palms flat. Nothing. Another breath, long and slow, then refill...

The spluttering of water logged lungs was a hideous relief. Jeff realised he was shaking when he rolled the man onto his side, watching as the water was vomited up in a pale choke, coughing and hacking, eyes wild. He patted the man’s back, even though the action made him feel stupid and ineffectual. The man was shivering, curling in on himself.

*“Hey,” Jeff said, unsure, “*hey. *You ok? Hey, say something. You ok?”*

The man mumbled something incoherent.

“What’d you say?”

Jeff leaned closer. The man sniffed loudly, his face crumpling.

“You fucking bastard,” the man said as he began to cry, “you fucking, stupid bastard.”

To this day Jeffrey Milo didn’t know if Will Graham had been talking to Jeff or to himself.

He had taken him back to his house, a pigsty of a place, the bin overflowing, the air stale and foul and the table littered with empty bottles; scotch and bourbon. And he had demanded an answer, demanded to know. And Will had fought him and cursed him and demanded that he leave.

And no one would ever call Jeff Milo arrogant or belligerent but he stood by his principles and he waited until the man was ready to talk. And his prejudice had slowly receded as the tale poured out of Will’s mouth in a reedy voice, ruined by the salt water, and words such as *post-natal depression* and *social services* and *they took my kid* filtered out. And Jeff had learned Will was an omega suffering and lost, and he’d felt surprised and shocked that an alpha would leave their mate in such dire circumstances. He assumed they might have died, only later learning the horrific truth.

Jeff had ended up spending the night sitting beside the man he had pulled from the water, rubbing his back because he felt lost and wasn’t sure how to help, listening to his terrible story.

And Will Graham had let him.

Atlanta was suffering through a dry heat at this time of year. Shimmering waves rising from the asphalt, making the cars seem to shiver as they drove. The sky was a pale, baby blue without a cloud in sight. Vending machines whined oppressively and babies wailed in their

prams. The city was dried out, stone baking and metal too hot to touch. The car's engine turned over noisily.

Will wondered, as he drove past the house where the Charles Leeds family had lived and died, what the hell he was doing here.

You saw it, Will told himself as he jerked the handbrake up. It was stiff, a crappy rental, some old Ford Mondeo well past its prime. He stayed in the car, air conditioning full blast. Will undid another button on his shirt and wiped at his forehead. You saw it and now you can't un-see it.

You've seen him and now he's in there, in your head, prowling around. The little Leeds girl flashed into his mind's eye as he blinked away the sweat. When he opened them again he stared at the house. He tried to think of Elle, smiling and alive, but the association only made it worse. He didn't want to imagine his little girl when he was trying to work. The thought made him sick.

You're already sick, Graham, he reminded himself. He sniffed in the dry air and swallowed. After the meeting with Lecter Will hadn't handled the situation well. He knew that. A night pumping himself full of self-loathing and strong spirits was a step on the slippery slope. Three times he'd started to call Milo only to stop, curse himself, and put down the phone before he got a chance to dial. It had only been the next morning, head splitting and tongue dry, he'd been able to face up to the fact.

He was back on the team.

As he sat and waited a few neighbours drove by, looking at the house and then looking away. A murder house was always an ugly house, like the face of someone who betrayed them. Only outsiders and children stared. And him.

The shades were up. That was a relief, it meant no relatives had been inside. Relatives always lowered the shades. Will walked around the side of the house, stopping twice to listen. The Atlanta PD knew he was here, Starling had called ahead to Crawford who had given the O-K. But that didn't mean the neighbours knew. He didn't want a bullet in the back from a twitchy trigger finger, desperate to protect their family from the Leeds' fate.

The door from the porch into the kitchen was patched with plywood where the police had taken out the glass. The thick, heavy yellow crime scene tape was laced over the door in two strands. A wide, red sticker was placed over the edge of the door and its frame. Will pulled out his Swiss army knife and slit through it, the plastic rupturing like an anemone touched, curling away. He unlocked the door with the key the police had given him.

It was a pull in his gut to turn on the lights, to make some noise, pull out a badge he didn't own and announce himself to the silent house where five people had died. He did none of that. Instead Will took a deep breath. He smelled furniture polish and apples. A hint of disinfectant.

Standing in the doorway, he could almost feel the shifting air, as if the madness that had walked into the house on size eleven feet was moving past him. It had been such a long time

but the pattern was so familiar. A long time since he'd dipped his head into the tar and let it flow down his throat. A long time since he'd spoken for someone capable of unconscionable acts.

In the Georgia heat on a late Friday evening, Will Graham closed his eyes and let the pendulum swing.

Once.

I slip the hook on the outside screen door. Stand in the darkness of the porch (the light didn't work when he flicked the switch, but the pilot lights were on in the boiler. Will checked the light. The bulb was missing). *So I'm hidden in the dark. I take something from my pocket. A suction-cup, maybe the base of a pencil sharpener designed to stick to a desk-top.*

Crouching against the wooden lower half of the kitchen door, I raise my head to peer up through the glass. I put out my tongue and I lick the cup, press it to the glass, flick the lever to make it stick. A small glass-cutter was attached to the cup with string so that I can cut a circle.

*The tiny squeal of the glass-cutter and one solid tap to break the glass. One hand to tap (*my left? My right?), *one hand to hold the suction cup. The glass must not fall. It is slightly egg shaped because the string wrapped around the shaft of the suction cup as I cut. There's a small grating noise as I pull the glass out. I wait, listen. Nothing.*

*My hand in the tight glove snakes in through the hole, finds the lock. The door opens silently. I am inside. In the light of the vent-hood I can see my body in this strange kitchen (*size eleven feet, I am tall enough). *It is pleasantly cool inside the house.*

Will Graham popped two aspirin, dry. He'd bought them at the store on the way there. It was inevitable, he'd known it. Between the heat and what lay behind the pendulum's swing, he knew he'd be going through them like a kid through candy.

Upstairs he turned on the lights. The bloodstains shouted at him from the walls, from the mattress and the floor. The air had screams smeared on it, like dust on glass. It smelled of rust and urine. Will flinched at the sound of the air conditioning springing to life. The dead house seemed as if it were struggling to stay alive.

The splash patterns of the blood on the wall had confused Atlanta police. Now, with the benefit of the coroner's report and the ability to *see*, Will was able to let it take shape in his head. He closed his eyes, dragged in the smell.

Twice.

They're in bed, asleep. I can see them from the doorway (it hadn't squeaked on the hinges when Will had entered). *I move silently on the carpet. I'm tall but I'm co-ordinated, fast. I reach down for Mr Leeds* (a registered alpha, he would have been the logical choice for the first victim - take him out and the strongest link is gone) *hand over his mouth, his eyes flick open in hazy fear. I cut his throat. Spurt! Up and over me, up and over the wall, creating an odd and difficult shadow pattern in the blood spatter. Then I walk over to the light switch and*

turn it on (there were hairs and oil from Mr Leeds' head left on the switch plate by a surgical glove).

I turn. She's sitting up, bleary, half asleep. She knows something's wrong. I put a bullet in her (the autopsy report showed the bullet had entered to the right of her naval and lodged itself in her lumbar spine, but she died of strangulation) *and I watch her. I know I watch her because it gives Leeds time to stand, the wound won't keep this dog down, and run to his kids, spraying gouts of blood as he fought. I shove him to the floor in his daughter's room and finish him there. When I look up she is watching me, small eyes wide in the darkness...*

A long steadying breath. Will sat down on the small bed and looked around the room. It was dark, the curtains still drawn. The daylight couldn't fight its way through from outside. He didn't want to turn on the light. This is how she would have seen it, he thought. He rubbed the sweat from his brow with the cuff of his shirt. It came away dark.

This is how she would have seen it. Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his neck with both hands. All the children had died quickly. It was the saving grace. Single gunshot wound to the head. Mrs Leeds had taken five minutes to die, or thereabouts. Mr Leeds bled to death with aspirated blood contributing. The Atlanta detectives had been thorough but there were still some unexplained aspects in their report, such as the profusion of bloodstains and matted sliding marks in the hall. One of the detectives had posited that the victims tried to crawl away from their killer. Will knew that wasn't the case – *he never would have allowed it.*

No, he moved them himself. Took them back to their parent's room, all of them (the blood stains on the mattress matched up, as did the blood stains on the opposite wall where he had sat the children one by one). Will returned to the master bedroom and stared at the scene. He could see the children there, like broken dolls on the floor facing the bed, Mrs Leeds spread out across the bottom, her husband trussed up to the headboard (there were post-mortem ligature marks around his torso – he'd been secured to the bed with something around his chest).

An audience. A dead audience. Brother, sister, big brother, Mr Leeds.

"You were making them watch," he said coldly, "weren't you."

What he had done to Mrs Leeds was obvious from the post mortem. The rape could only have taken place after she was dead. Will wondered what light would have been on in the room. Still the overhead? He looked around. *Would he light a candle?* He wondered, *the flickering light would simulate expression on their faces.* No candle had been found. *Maybe he would think to do it next time...*

The first small bond to the killer itched and stung like a leech. Will clenched his hands and licked his lips. *Fucking bastard. Fucking stupid bastard you should be at home, watching cartoons on the TV with your kid,* your *kid. These kids are dead. You can't help these kids, what are you doing here huh?*

What are you doing here?

Will bit at the inside of his lip and ignored the voice.

The third time.

Why do I move them again? Why don't I leave them the way they fall? There's something, something you don't want me to know about you. Something you're ashamed of? Or can you not afford for me to know.

The eyes of the little Leeds girl had seemed like glass. On closer inspection it showed slices of mirror placed into the eyes of each of the victims, creating horrifying reflections in place of the most expressive organ. The mirror in the bathroom had been smashed, according to the report, though no blood had been found. He'd used something heavy.

Why? *I want to see myself when I look at them. See myself in them. See myself in their...*

"Eyes," Will's voice was soft. His own blinked. He frowned.

Did I open their eyes?
Did you open their eyes?

Two voices seemed to say both questions at once.

Mrs Leeds is lovely, he's seen her before. Beautiful, blue eyes. I turned on the light after I cut Mr Leeds' throat so I could see her when she watched him flop. It was maddening to have to wear gloves when I touched her. Aching to feel that warm skin.

He checked the report in his shaking hands. There was talcum powder on her leg, her upper thigh. Will licked his lips, trying to taste the sweat. He hurried to the bathroom, raking through their cabinet. No talcum. He tried the vanity cabinet in the master bedroom, nothing. The list of evidence hadn't found any talcum.

I took off my gloves, didn't I? You took off your gloves, didn't you, you son of a bitch? *The powder came out of my rubber glove as I snap it off, can't wait to touch, to touch her cooling skin*. It spilled out as you took off your glove because you wanted to touch her with your bare hands and then you put the gloves back on and *I wipe her down, so carefully, still feeling her soft hairs on my fingertips, but while the gloves were off did I open their eyes?*

Did you open their eyes?

The phone was automatic in his hand, fingers moving without thinking. It was answered on the fifth ring.

"This is Crawford," it was odd to hear his voice after so long. It made all the time in between his leaving the BAU and now seem like nothing.

"Jack, it's Will."

A pause, not long but longer than he had ever expected from Jack. Then, "Will. Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Does Jimmy Price still work Latent Prints?"

“Yeah. He doesn’t go out much anymore. He’s working on the single-print index.”

“I think he ought to come to Atlanta,” Will knew he was pushing it. Not only was he barely back on the team after basically abandoning his post five years prior, but now he was ordering his alpha boss around as if he were his school teacher. There was a pause.

“Why? The guy down there is pretty damn good.”

“He is good, but he’s not Price.”

“This had better be going somewhere. What do you want him for?” Jack was getting cranky.

“Mrs Leeds' fingernails and toenails. They were painted, it’s a slick surface. And the corneas of all their eyes. I think he took his gloves off Jack. I think he had to touch her.”

“Ok. Ok Will, I hear you. Jesus, Price’ll have to gun it,” Jack said with a sigh, “the funeral’s tomorrow afternoon.”

He hung up once the time and place was agreed for a meeting. Will ran his hand through his hair and felt sickeningly tired. The adrenaline had made him shaky, *like coming down from the afterglow*. His head was swimming. Lying down on the bed seemed like a good idea at the time.

Lying where Mr Leeds had been placed, Will Graham slipped into a deep, fitful sleep, before the shadow of the dead audience against the wall.

Zip it All the Way up to G

Chapter Notes

> I have messed with Hannibal's origin story a little here, so that he can have some living relatives, in case anyone wonders why there are people popping up who should be 'dead'.
> Also the title of this chapter comes from my best remembrance of something Hannibal says in the film 'Manhunter' when he's on the phone. I'm not sure if it's exactly correct but I've always loved the scene where he finds out Will's address so it's staying, regardless!

A few days had been bad enough. A week was pushing it. Two weeks and Eleanor had begun asking difficult questions and Jeff had begun to reach the end of his tolerance. Then a phone call, in the middle of the night. He'd barely been aware of the first few minutes of it. Will had been patient enough to let him wake up before telling him the news.

"You've gotta come out here. Don't argue with me. He knows where I live, ok? He knows."

"Who knows?"

"Take a wild guess," Will had said, his voice sharp and cold; Jeff wasn't used to that sort of thing. Will had always tried to be warm with him.

He remembered cursing at him, maybe calling him a '*reckless bastard*' and '*a fucking maniac*'. Then he'd calmed down enough to feel like shit for saying it. Will looked terrible, his skin seemed stretched, pale. His eyes were clear but haunted. Jeff remembered *that* look.

When Susan finds out about this she's going to kill me, he thought. She'll skin me alive and hang me on a wall as an example to others. Jesus, he thought as he held Anthony's hand while his son walked beside him, you're a god damned fool Jeff. A god damned fool.

The airport was busy but calming. Jeff had always liked airports, in the same way he liked hotel rooms and fancy restaurants. They all held a unique essence of anonymity, while catering to your every need. As they rolled up the concourse, trailing their suitcases, he watched the shops pass them by. No obligation, no pressure. Just a transitory space where he could feel as if he wasn't being a reckless fool. Even with the subtly placed FBI escort flanking them while they walked.

He caught sight of himself in a shop window display as they passed. He'd dressed in a rush, a white t-shirt that was a little too small, faded stonewashed jeans and the sandals that had been by the door. His sandy blonde hair was a bit of a mess, flopping down over his ears and

forehead. He needed a haircut, he thought as he ran his hand through his hair, trying to temper it. His green eyes didn't seem focussed. He was pretty sure he knew why.

"Will daddy meet us? Daddy went on the plane too and he said he'd be on lots of planes. I want to speak to daddy."

"We're going to see him soon," Jeff smiled down at Elle fractiously; she looked entirely comfortable in her toddler harness, secured tightly to Jeff's belt. She hadn't been so impressed when he'd initially put it on her but he wasn't taking no for an answer. One kid was enough to follow in a vast, easily-losable-in-area such as an airport. And Will had a story a week about Elle's love of hiding, in department stores, in cinemas, in play rooms. She seemed to think it was great fun. Jeff didn't think it sounded that great.

"Gonna go on a plane, gonna go on a plane!" she jumped forwards like a frog with every word, "Can I see outta the window and we'll go real high and see our house?"

"Yeah, maybe," he said absently as he checked the departures board, "if we can sit by the window."

"Dad, can I get a drink?" Anthony asked.

"Sure buddy, just as soon as I find our gate ok?"

The journey was too easy. He kept waiting for something to go wrong. Jeff sat in the isle while Elle plastered her face to the window, watching as they taxied to the runway. Anthony had sulked, 'I want the window' he'd whined. Jeff had pointed out that this was Elle's first plane ride, so it was only fair she get to see them take off. 'You can have the window on the way back, ok?'

Jeff leaned out into the isle and looked back up the long tube of the plane, murky grey seats with yellow head flaps. He could see Agent Whitward in thirty two B, reading a magazine, Agent Marquez walking back to her seat from the bathroom. The 'fasten seat belts' light pinged into life.

On the way back. However that was going to end up.

"You're sure I look ok?"

"You look great. Honestly," Jeff said for the umpteenth time that morning, grinning as he added, "who would've thought you scrubbed up this nice."

"Thanks, that's funny, really," Will said sardonically as he straightened his tie.

It may have been a joke at heart but Jeff was only half kidding. He would never have imagined that the mess of a man he'd pulled from the ocean would be standing before him, looking like your average, blue collar southerner. Well, more than average really. Hair trimmed to soft waves, a pressed suit hanging nicely on his lithe frame, glasses covering his

eyes. He'd even shaved, which Jeff wasn't so sure about because it seemed to take ten years off him. Made him look too young.

Will fussed with his jacket sleeves.

"You're going to have to go," Jeff checked his watch as he handed Will his briefcase, "no point in all this if you're late," he continued as he walked towards the door.

"Jeff."

The one word stopped him. Over the past four months Will Graham had been a tightly curled bud refusing to open. No amount of prodding or pulling had helped. But Jeff had stayed anyway. He'd brought over food when they cooked too much at home. He'd turn up at Will's door and not stop knocking until he got an answer. He'd bring over beers because then at least he knew Will wasn't drinking anything harder. He'd helped him build his case against his alpha's family for getting his daughter back, vouched for him, got his one high up friend in Child Services to do him favours he wasn't sure he deserved. And Will Graham had let him.

'Let' being the operative word.

It turned out, he'd found quite quickly, that the bud had to open on its own terms. Will Graham wasn't one to be ordered around or coerced into anything, even if it was regaining his own sanity.

So when he heard his name, said in that deferential and quiet tone, Jeff Milo stopped and turned. Will was standing by the mirror, staring into it as if psyching himself up for something.

"Yeah?" Jeff asked.

"Thanks," Will said, swallowing, "you're a good guy, you know that?"

"Sure I do," Jeff grinned.

"You're a good guy."

Then he took two strides towards him and pulled him into an awkward hug. Jeff hadn't known what to do with his hands, or his arms, or where to put his body in general. It was a shock, Will didn't do physical contact, *and it made him feel surreally exceptional. Their chests were pressed tightly, Will's arms around his back. Up close Will's scent was noticeable,* hot skin, soap and something indefinable.

Will didn't let go as soon as he expected he would and all of a sudden Jeff found his face in Will's neck, taking a long, slow inhale. A moment started. Then it stopped. Will pulled back and cleared his throat, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He wasn't the only one.

"I have to go," Will said, "thanks Jeff I...thanks."

"Go bring her home," Jeff managed to smile.

It was an added stress, that's all it was. Jeff went home, climbing up over the dunes on the beach. The smell of hot skin was in his nose every time he sniffed. *Anthony, who had been outside playing on the porch while he and Will finished up, ran at his side giggling.*

"Gonna have a little sister!" he was shouting.

"Anthony, don't scream," he said curtly.

If they gave her to him, he thought anxiously. Little Eleanor Graham, stuck in the arms of his criminal alpha's relatives while her dad tried his best to get himself on his feet; make himself acceptable. It'd been hard on him, harder than it should have been, harder than anyone deserved. Jeff almost couldn't stand the idea of Will coming home empty handed.

The thought of him cracking open like a dropped egg, he'd be hospitalised or worse if the depression came back. *Jeff couldn't stand the idea of dragging another body from the ocean. The nightmares from just once were bad enough.*

Jeff fixed himself and Anthony some iced tea and put something mindless on the TV as background noise. He was glad Susan wasn't home. She would've said something inflammatory, it would've started an argument...right now he couldn't take that. She didn't like Will, he wasn't entirely sure why, but she didn't like him. But then Susan had never been the most understanding of people when it came to the problems of others.

'Ever think there's a good reason they took that kid away?' was her favourite question when he tried to defend their neighbour. That was usually a clincher, because Jeff didn't know. All he knew was that, as far as he was concerned, Will was a good guy and if he could get his kid back he'd be an even better guy.

He was quietly intelligent, with a dry sense of humour that sometimes blindsided him out of nowhere. He was considered and agile and couldn't hold his liquor. He liked fixing machines because he said they 'made sense', which most other people seemingly didn't too him. He was suspicious and unapproachable but once you got to know him he was loyal as a dog.

Jeff liked him. Susan thought Jeff was naive. Jeff didn't care. He would rather be naive than whatever she was.

He'd fallen asleep on the sofa. It was Anthony who'd woken him, his little face split into a childish smile.

"Dad! Dad! Someone knockin'!"

Catching sight of the time made him nervous, early evening. *Why had it taken so long? He'd gone to the front door on instinct. Finding it empty, his heart sank. Then Anthony laughed, wobbly on his toddler feet, and ran through the hall. Jeff followed him to the kitchen, then the back door.*

He found Will sitting on his back porch, facing the ocean, his form an almost silhouette against the golden sand.

“Hey.”

Will turned to look over his shoulder. His eyes were shining, but his mouth smiled. Jeff couldn’t bring himself to relax until he heard it.

“She’s coming home tomorrow.”

“Oh thank fu-!” Jeff aborted the word half way as Anthony toddled out, latching onto Will and blowing a raspberry onto his shoulder. Will laughed, his eyes creasing, and stuck his tongue out as Jeff picked Anthony up. The little boy giggled, arms flailing, “Tony, don’t be a beast.”

“It’s ok,” Will said, wiping at the wet patch on his shoulder, “I don’t mind.”

“Go on inside, ok? And stay out of the kitchen.”

They sat together on the porch. Will was quiet but then that wasn’t unusual for him. The smile was. The low level, constant smile on his face was almost alien. Jeff liked it. Eventually Will turned to him and said, in a slow, quiet voice.

“I think a celebration is in order.”

“You want to pick up your baby girl with a hangover tomorrow?” Jeff asked, not impressed.

“This’ll be the last time I get to have a drink,” Will said, still smiling, “because as of tomorrow, that’s me. Ok?”

“That’s you huh?”

“Cold turkey. And anyway, you’ll be my supervisor, right?”

Jeff laughed and shook his head, “Just a couple then.”

“Thanks Jeff. You’re a good guy.”

Will Graham was livid. So livid he could barely see straight. So livid that it had taken him quarter of an hour of striding out of the building just to realise that he wasn’t as alone as he thought he was. He was being followed. First instinct was to draw his gun, *the heavy, reassuring weight Crawford had given him when he’d handed over his temporary badge*, aim and demand a name. Instead he’d managed to keep calm enough to figure out it was a familiar face.

He’d kept walking anyway. The familiar face followed him until he hit the nearby park. At this time of evening the lights were coming on one by one. The sound of the wind in the eucalyptus trees wasn’t calming, it was terse and harsh. It fitted his mood. He liked it. He walked in, finding the nearest bench and throwing himself onto it.

It wasn't long before the face drew near enough to speak.

"Well fancy meeting you here," she said.

"Yeah," Will replied, shaking his head, "tell me about it."

Alana Bloom hadn't changed much in the past couple of years. Still well dressed even in stressful situations, still smelling of geranium oil and flowery musk, still drop dead gorgeous. Will had always known he wasn't interested in women but even he could admit it. Her long, black hair shone blue in the fading light. She crossed her legs and sat back, her skirt hitching up over her knees.

"How long have you been here?" Will asked.

"A couple of days."

"Haven't seen you around," he said, dead-pan, "been watching me long?"

"It's not like that."

"Sure it is. I'm guessing this is Jack's doing?"

"He contacted me, yes. Do I have to stress the point?"

"Is there a point?" Will asked with a sharp smile.

"Stress the point that I'm not here to analyse you. I'm not your keeper, I'm just here if you need me."

"Then why the fuck are you following me, huh?"

The silence was broken by the sounds of blackbirds singing virulently in the trees. The eucalyptus leaves turned in the air, white sides catching the evening glow. Alana stayed quiet, as she always had when Will became belligerent. He took a deep breath through his nose but the feelings wouldn't abate. The music from a nearby car startled him, loud and abrasive until it sped out of earshot.

Will was spoiling for a fight, he knew it. The feelings wouldn't leave him. He bit at the inside of his lip and rubbed at his face.

"Hannibal said you'd been to see him," Will said, mainly because he liked using Lecter's name thoughtlessly. It made him feel like he had power over the man, even if it didn't exist.

"Yes," Alana said carefully, "but not for a while. Five months ago I think. I put him through a Thematic Apperception Test."

"You did *what*?" Will laughed derisively, "Oh Jesus. I wish I'd been there for that. How long before he laughed at Mf 13?"

“Well, it was obvious after that he was playing me,” Alana shrugged, sitting forwards, “but then I’ve begun to expect nothing less from him.”

“He loves to play people,” Will said savagely, his eyes hard though his smile remained, “and people just love to give themselves to him to play with. Do you know how he found my address?”

“Will...”

“Phoned the Chicago Department of Psychiatry and asked for you. He *phoned* your fucking number knowing you wouldn’t be there, and wheedled it out of some fucking grad student. Remember to kick them out of college by the way, when you get back that is,” he added acidly.

“Look...”

“Know why he knew you wouldn’t be there?” he could feel his voice getting tighter and tighter, “Because he knew I was here. So he knew you’d be here too. Smart. Real smart, huh?”

“It wasn’t in the message, I mean he didn’t send it to the Tooth Fairy. The cryptographers cracked the message he put in the personal ads. It wasn’t anything major.”

“*I love your work*,” Will repeated as if he were spitting out stones, “*you are very beautiful*. He still knows how to charm, doesn’t he.”

“He didn’t give out your address,” she stressed, “We can be thankful for small mercies.”

“No,” Will gritted out, turning to look at Alana; she flinched under his stare, “he didn’t send it to that fucking lunatic. I should be so goddamned pleased. Instead I have *another* fucking lunatic with my address. A lunatic who prefers his victims with a side salad.”

The evening began to dim. Will felt his anger subsiding with it, even if his resentment continued to smoulder, hot and red. When Crawford had come to tell him the news Will had almost smelled the bitterness on him. *‘Lecter sent me a message’*. He’d handed it to Will without waiting for the question, written on a piece of scrap paper in a tight, controlled hand.

Graham Family, Stellrecht Point, Key Largo, Florida. Must send postcard.

Crawford didn’t know how lucky he was that Will didn’t up and leave right there and then, once he’d crunched the paper in his hand into an unrecognisable ball. He'd known why Lecter had done it; power and control. He'd wanted to show Will that he wasn't safe, would never truly be safe. That, at any time and in any place, Hannibal could find him. Somehow he also knew he was expected to feel gratitude. Gratitude to Hannibal for not sending the Tooth Fairy his address and setting the madman on his little girl.

Will would never acknowledge that. Not in his lifetime.

When he'd been given the message, truthfully he’d felt sick. Then terrified. Then white-hot

angry. Then weak at the knees. *Elle, oh jesus Ellie*. He thanked his lucky stars that Milo was willing to do what needed to be done, even if the man had looked like he wanted to reach through the screen and strangle him. Will didn't think he'd fight him if he wanted to. He had every right.

Brought this on yourself, haven't you, he thought, *can't leave well enough alone.*

"Come on," he said stiffly, rubbing at the back of his neck as he stood, "we'd better get back before they send out the dogs."

"Ok," Alana said reasonably; Will hated her reasonable tone. It made him feel like a child.

Maybe if you stop acting like one she'll stop treating you like one. Will told his conscience to go fuck itself.

The oppressive Washington city air was alien, even as it held bad memories. Remembering the stuffy Baltimore streets as he'd walked to the market – *(picking up smoked salmon and brie as a surprise when Hannibal had been on three backshifts. The man's smile when Will laid out the tray with an espresso on the side while Hannibal dried himself, fresh from the shower. The kiss at the corner of his eye and the hand at his hip.)*

Now all he wanted was fresh air from the ocean, sweeping in with the morning tide change, and the long shadows cast on the sand dunes. Not the long shadows cast by the high rises, the change in air coming with the change in street lights as the cars puffed up their engines and pumped out their fumes. Everything was out of place, him most of all.

It was a juggle of confusing and malicious thoughts. Will wanted to go home, but now he wasn't sure where home was.

He started to laugh, "Just like old times."

"What is?"

"This. You talking me down from some crazy shit while I scare the crap out of everyone else."

"Back then I didn't have to. You had someone else to do that for you."

"You know you never thanked me."

"For what?" Alana frowned, scuffing her heels as she walked.

"For marrying Hannibal before you got your chance."

"Will, for crying out loud."

"Don't think I didn't notice. You're lucky, you know. Back then I was pretty het up. Probably would have punched your lights out if you'd touched him."

“He was my mentor while I did my PhD at St. James. That was it. Wow, this is still a thing for you, isn’t it? A boat load of bullshit.”

“You still haven’t thanked me.”

“That’s because I don’t like to thank people for taking a bullet. And anyway, I never wanted to marry him.”

“Just fuck him, huh?”

“Christ, that’s enough,” she said, irritated, as they reached the door, “I’ll be at the Marriot. Jack has my number. He can pass it on. Maybe you can call once you’re done feeling sorry for yourself.”

Will didn’t think that would be any time soon.

“I was right,” Jeff grinned, poking Will in the chest, “you can’t hold your liquor.”

“When’d you ever say that?” Will asked, laughing as he let himself drop ungracefully onto the sofa.

The celebration had been trickier than he’d expected, mainly because he was the supervisor and, as supervisor, shouldn’t have gotten drunk. It had seemed harmless, a few beers, but then the rum had come out from the back of the cabinet, where Susan thought she’d hidden it from him*, and he’d made caipirinhas with the mint from the plant on the counter. He could almost hear her voice,* you start on the rum and you drink too much. I hate it when you get drunk.

It had made him want to drink more.

Anthony was already asleep in his cot upstairs. Jeff had thought it would be ok. He hadn’t meant for things to get messy.

The more they drank the more everything dripped down into a comfortable malaise. Jeff spent half an hour telling Will about giant sea snails, sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa, most of which Will seemed to understand fairly well considering how much they’d drunk. Then they’d fallen to talking about family, friends. Will had pulled his wallet out and tugged out the pictures he kept there.

“Gees is that you?” Jeff had said, spluttering into his drink.

“Me an’ my dad,” Will said, slapping the picture on the glass coffee table, “when we used to go finsh-fishing in North Carolina.”

“Fish is as big as you.” The photograph was small and cropped, just enough to see a stern faced older man behind a teenage boy holding a huge bass. Will had been a good looking kid. He looked up when another was put down, “what’s this one?”

“That’s me getting married,” Will managed to sound like he thought the word was deliberately obtuse; Jeff’s eyes had gone wide.

“Married? You never told me you were married,” the photo was slightly curled at the edges, as if it had been taken out and put back many times. Photo Will looked young, much like he had that morning with his clean shaven face. Though photo-Will’s suit was a far better fit, dark black, and his smile seemed without a myriad of worries underlying it. Beside him stood a handsome man wearing a grey, double breasted suit with a chocolate coloured waistcoat and maroon tie to match his eyes. He was distinctly unusual in the face, high cheekbones and full lips, hair swept into an elegant side parting. He was clearly older than Will, but then Jeff couldn’t tell by how much.

“I did tell you!” Will looked at him with a frown and a smile, “Didn’t I? That’s...” Will pointed at the man and, for a moment, his eyes lost their happy lustre; Will cleared his throat and started again, “that’s Eleanor’s dad.”

“Fuck,” Jeff said; he purposefully pored himself some more rum, straight, and took a large sip. He felt like he might need it. There were so many questions running through his mind. Will had told him the alpha he’d mated was in prison, but had never said what for. Or told him they were actually married. He couldn’t help saying, “look at you two. She’s gonna be one good lookin’ lady when she’s older, huh?”

Will smacked the back of his head. Jeff punched him in the shoulder.

“Gimme that,” he said, snatching it back, “I’m getting rid of them.”

“What? Why?”

“Cause this is it, new beginnings,” Will sounded incredibly, suddenly focused, “and I don’t want any of this shit in my new life with my baby girl. So this,” he stuffed both the photos into his empty glass and picked up the rum, “is goodbye.”

The alcohol lifted up and over his young face, smiling with the fish in his arms, up and over the handsome face of the alpha in his trim suit, until they were all drowned in a heady brown. For a moment Jeff felt stunned. But Will was laughing, properly laughing from his belly to his mouth, curled on the sofa, his face red from the heat and the alcohol. And then Jeff was laughing too, not even knowing what the joke was. He moved from the floor to sitting on the sofa at Will’s feet and finished his drink in two swallows.

“Oh god,” Will was wiping his eyes, “it’s so stu-pihd...” the end of the word dissolved and elongated into another laugh.

“What?” Jeff asked, breathing heavy from his own fit, “what the hell’s stupid?”

“Being sober,” Will grinned, “isso fucking stupid.”

“Yeah,” Jeff agreed, letting his head rest back against the sofa, “too fucking right. All day I’ve felt like utter shit. In fact for the past couple of months I’ve felt utter shit and now I feel great. Tis that simple. Thank you Latin America.”

“I mean look at me,” Will struggled to sit up, his own legs getting in the way; Jeff grinned and grabbed his hands, pulling him round until Will fell against his side, “see? See that! I don’t give a crap about it,” he said, nodding to where Jeff held onto him. Will took Jeff’s right hand and draped his arm around Will’s shoulders, “On a normal day I’d be wantin’ to kill you about now. But see? Rum,” he said as he relaxed, head falling onto Jeff’s shoulder.

“It’s a miracle,” Jeff said; his head was swimming. The last two swallows of straight liquor had pushed him over the metaphorical edge.

“Sure damn well is. See?” Will cupped Jeff’s head and turned his face into the crook of Will’s neck. There was a clawing sense of sobriety in the familiarity of the act. Jeff swallowed but couldn’t stop himself drawing in that scent. It was warm, hot even, burning in his nostrils, “Earlier on? I wanted to kick you in the nuts for doing that.”

“Yeah?” Jeff said, unsteady as he pulled back; enough, but not enough. He had pulled back just enough for their foreheads to be nearly touching.

“Yeah,” Will closed his eyes, smile still plastered on his face. He breathed out; sweet mint and heady rum and a hint of sugar and hops.

When Jeff leaned in and kissed him Will merely laughed tiredly.

“And I would’ve prob-ly castrated you for that,” he said, eyes slit open.

Will didn’t stop him when he leaned back in. They bumped noses. Will chuckled dreamily. He did laugh against his lips, muffled but genuine. The arm around his shoulders held him in place. Jeff thought he might have been a little more sober than he’d hoped.

Things had escalated from there. He didn’t entirely remember the whole thing, or how they’d progressed from a gentle, regretful, drunken kiss, to having his tongue down Will’s throat as Will fisted his stiff cock, freed from his fly, and Jeff slid his hand down under the waistband of Will’s jeans, past his ass to find his dripping entrance and slip his fingers inside.

He did remember it the next morning. Unfortunately, they both did.

Will went to the safe house because he didn’t think he could bear another phone call. It was a tall Georgian townhouse, inconspicuous in its looks and safe in its area. He didn’t recognise the agent on the door. She introduced herself as Marquez, short with black hair cut into a sharp bob, fanning against her neck and her bronzed skin. Will didn’t mind that she grilled him and double checked his badge at the door. It meant she was doing her job.

“Daddy!”

He would be lying if he’d said he wasn’t ecstatic to feel Elle in his arms. As soon as she’d seen him she’d run the full length of the long corridor beyond the entrance and jumped. He picked her up and swung her around, pushing his face into her curls.

“Oh Ellie. Oh Ellie I’m sorry. I missed you. I missed you so much.”

“Daddy I miss-ed you too. We went on a plane to see you.”

“I know. Yeah,” Will looked up to see Milo descending the stairs, his face set, “You want to tell me about it huh?”

“I’ll tell you all abou’ it!” Elle squealed.

“Ok, but it’s dinner time,” Will looked away, back to Elle, “How about we get some food and then we have desert and you can tell me everything. I brought cake.”

“Uh huh,” Elle bounced in his arm, “uh huh. I want the biggest piece!”

It turned out Anthony and Elle had been playing with Agent Whitward in the living room. It was long and high roofed with a large fireplace and tall windows. The dying light cast odd shadows. They’d been playing buckaroo. Whitward nodded to him when he entered. He gave Elle a nudge back in the door, leaving them to their fun.

When he returned to the main corridor Milo was still standing half way down the stairs. Will nodded, licking his lips, and followed him when he turned and ascended. There were three doors on the second landing. Milo took the first on the left.

The door closed with a snap. It was cool inside, sparsely fitted with a cheap wardrobe and dresser beside a single bed with a blue duvet. Will leaned against the wall and dragged in the smell of a stranger’s house, mixed with the very faint smell of damp.

Milo sat down on the bed, his shoulders sagging. It was quiet in the way only people with too much to say could be quiet with each other. Will remembered Hannibal being the same when he had something on his mind. Will had always been able to hear the cogs ticking round in his brain. Used to drive him crazy.

Eventually Will broke the silence.

“Does Susan know?”

“Yeah,” Jeff nodded, taking a deep breath through his nose and letting it out slowly, “yeah she knows.”

“I’m guessing she wasn’t happy.”

“Nice guess.”

“Feel vilified, did she? All the things she used to say about me must be coming true for her, huh?”

“Will, would you stop it? I’ve had a long day.”

He stopped it, though he was itching to tell Milo he’d had a long two weeks. Enough of bouncing about over the South East, staring into places filled with the memories of a sick

man who needed to kill like others needed to get laid. Of staring at blood stains on walls and beginning to understand why they'd been put there. Looking at photographs of dead kids and wishing he wasn't.

Of falling asleep to the feeling of Hannibal trailing his fingers along his spine.

"Sorry," Will breathed out instead, "I mean it. I'm sorry. I'm really damn sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Well it has. So that's all there is to it."

"Yeah," Will agreed, even though Jeff's tone left a hell of a lot unsaid.

"Susan's going to come and get Anthony. Take him to stay at her mom's."

"From St Petersburg? I thought she was away on research? Wait, you're not going?" Will looked up, frowning, "You shouldn't be here. You get that? This isn't your place."

"Not yours either," Jeff pointed out, looking up at him.

"It is," Will nodded, "I wish it wasn't but it is. Look, you need to go with him. I can't stand the idea of this fucking up your family t..."

"Susan didn't go away on research," Jeff butted in; Will snapped his mouth shut and thought *this is where the boat begins to sink*, "she left me."

"God dammit," Will ran a hand down over his mouth, fingers tripping off the bottom of his chin, "why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought she might change her mind. Come home. I've been waiting for her to call since before you left."

"She hasn't?"

"She hasn't."

"Right. Well..." Will felt derailed, "that doesn't mean you have to..." he stopped, then hesitated, finally managing..."this wasn't because of..."

"You?" Jeff let out a tut of breath, "Jesus Will, don't be so full of yourself."

"Ok."

"We've been falling apart for a while now," Jeff sounded like he was explaining it to himself, convincing himself, "think maybe-shit I don't know. We were holding it together because of Tony. Me. I don't know. Look...I want to stay alright?"

"Alright," Will nodded. He sat down on the bed, careful not to touch Milo, "I'd like you to stay too. You're a good guy," he managed a strained smile, "you know that?"

“Yeah,” Jeff said, leaning forwards, elbows on his knees, his smile slight but noticeable, “so you keep telling me.”

The door opened after a brief knock. Will looked up to find Marquez at the door, her severe face looking between them once before talking.

“Crawford needs you back at J.E.H., asap.”

“Can you give me a ride?” Will asked, “I was dropped off.”

“Of course,” she said, before disappearing.

Will left before Jeff could say anything to make him reconsider. The sound of Elle’s high pitched voice followed him out of the door, grasping at his ankles as if to slow his footsteps.

The mansion sat on the hill, amidst its grounds just outside of Washington. Sprawling acres of green land, not a single part left to chance; cropped gardens, mowed lawns, tennis courts, arboretums planned to within the leaf. Will thought that part of him appreciated the organisation, while the rest of him screamed for free will to return to the greens.

Trees and tall grass and wildflowers. He thought he preferred that. As Hannibal drove the Bentley up the exorbitant driveway towards the officious frontage, he began to feel a little antsy.

“You have nothing to be worried about,” Hannibal said, running his fingers down the back of Will’s hand as he changed gear.

“Not worried. Just...”

“Anxious. You have no need to be anxious either.”

“Sure I do,” he said, looking out at the flower beds lining the drive. He caught sight of a tall fan of beautiful plumage and heard a wild cry like a child’s voice; a white peacock. Will sighed, “sure I do.”

A butler came to welcome them, trailing two smartly dressed youths who took their bags into the house. Will itched to help, hating to see others carrying his things. He was still a little rattled from the speed of the past few weeks. The marriage had been planned as if Hannibal had already had everything in hand for months, which Will was beginning to suspect he had, and then getting clothes fitted and trying to find people to come on his side (a rather depressingly short list) and trying to get time off to go away for their honeymoon.

And now an invite from the soon-to-be-in-laws. Will felt he had every right to be anxious. French Ambassador, Count Robert Guyer-Lecter, the uncle. Semi-retired prima ballerina in the Moscow ballet Lady Murasaki, the aunt. The money didn’t need a price tag, and the connections were like a spider’s web that spanned the globe. Will felt like a small fleck of dirt floating in a champagne flute as he walked through the door.

The staircase in the main hall was doubled, a symmetrical split, reaching up to a second floor balcony lined by grand and dour looking portraits. The height of the room alone gave Will a sense of reverse vertigo. He had been so busy looking at the stairs that he hadn't noticed the person approaching from the left.

"Hannibal, my dear. It is so good to see you."

He had no idea what to call her, not that she was paying any attention to him. She was a good two feet smaller than Hannibal, black hair tied back in a tight bun which only accentuated her high cheekbones and slim, dark brown eyes. Will had to admit she was stunningly beautiful, even if he'd rather she wasn't. It was easy to see her as superior to him with her regal bearing. Semi-retired or not she moved with the flat footed, duck walk of a ballerina out of her slippers, and her arms moved in a graceful wave as she placed her hands on either side of Hannibal's elbows and allowed him to lean in and kiss her cheeks, once, twice.

"Ogenki desu ka, Murasaki-basan?" he asked while Will moved on his feet, trying to appear comfortable.

"English Hannibal, where are your manners?" though when she finally acknowledged him he wished she hadn't; her brown eyes were accessing and her smile did nothing to reach them. It seemed to stick beneath her cheeks like a jammed door, "I am well. But this must be Will Graham."

"Pleasure to meet you," he said, nodding his head.

"Of course," she said ambiguously; Will was sure it meant many things, 'of course'...it's a pleasure to meet her, 'of course'...he would not know how to act, 'of course'...he had turned out to be just as unacceptable on first meeting as she had expected him to be.

"Is uncle home?" Hannibal asked as he removed his gloves.

"Kare wa kono yoru o kaeshimasu," his aunt answered in Japanese; Will bristled, not blind to the obvious slight.

"Then we shall freshen up before he returns. Will?"

"Right," he said stiffly; he couldn't help but feel infinitely better when Hannibal offered his arm. Will linked with him and felt his set shoulders loosen slightly.

Merely walking to Hannibal's room felt as if he were receiving the grand tour. The house was vast and grandiose, the halls lined with red carpet flanked by polished floorboards, the walls decked in tapestries and sporting priceless artworks as casually as a mother displays their children's drawings on a fridge.

Hannibal's room was a beautiful suite, the furnishings decorated in violet and silver, four large windows with heavy drapery facing out over the gardens. The king sized bed looked large enough for six people to sleep comfortably, and the furniture was all distressingly original. Will didn't feel he'd be comfortable using any of it in case he broke something he'd regret.

“Relax,” came the half order, half reassurance, as Hannibal walked up behind him and took hold of his shoulders.

“Not going to happen,” Will smiled grimly, “feel free to keep trying though.”

“Mmm, I see you are not to be persuaded,” he said as Will turned to face him.

“Don’t think it’s me who has to be persuaded,” Will said tightly.

“My family are more than capable of being civil.”

“Civility has its sharp edges. When is your uncle home?”

“My aunt said this evening. He normally returns from work around half past six. We are free until then.”

“Good,” Will said, not beating around the bush, “because I need a bath. A long, hot bath. In a dark room.”

“May I join you?”

Will smiled. He felt as if he should be objecting to their making love under the roof of relatives, but reminded himself that if they didn’t care about him, why should he care about them? “Not sure if that’ll help me relax, exactly, but I find I can’t say no.”

“I am glad,” Hannibal said, leaning in to run his tongue up the side of Will’s throat, making him shiver and gasp, “because I was not sure how much longer I was going to last, trapped in that car, forced to keep my hands on the wheel. Your scent is most effusive today.”

“With all these clothes in the way? How can you possibly tell?” Will teased demurely.

Hannibal had smiled, eyes shining, “I will always know you, dearest,” he said, whispering into his ear as he undid the first button on Will's jacket, “inside and out.”

Teeth, Claws and Ink

Chapter Notes

> Just in case anyone was wondering how I envisaged Jeffrey Milo, this wonderful man was my inspiration, sans beard. I've always had such a huge crush on Richard Dreyfuss, especially when I was younger, ever since 'Jaws'. I mean how can you not love a guy who gets to say lines like, "I'm not going to waste my time arguing with a man who's lining up to be a hot lunch'.
>
> https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/35/61/6f/35616fbb7d27054ae9076e28c4f91a05.jpg

"He did *what*?"

Jack hadn't seemed to be able to hold onto his resentment for long. Will had fallen back into place like a cog slotted back into a well oiled machine. The years of resentment were the grease that seemed to slick their way; Will wondered if familiarity bred resentment which in turn bred a good work ethic. They had no need to focus on anything but the job.

And now the job had become a little more difficult.

"He ate it."

"What was it written on?" Will asked.

"Tissue paper. Toilet tissue we think, from what we can see on the footage. Chilton said that one of the letters passed to Lecter hadn't been opened by the admin staff. Was passed in sealed by mistake. He gets a lot of mail, apparently. I heard all about it from Chilton," Jack said, looking unimpressed, "whining about being more like his secretary than his minder. When the security guard noticed him opening a sealed envelope in his cell the alarm was sounded. By the time they got the door open and were down the hall, Lecter had the damn thing in his mouth. Swallowed it. It's gone."

"Fuck," Will rubbed at his face, livid, "*fuck*. That's great. That's just great."

"Starling?" Jack asked; the young woman was sitting at a desk in the middle of the office, staring at the computer screen as it played over the security footage.

"He takes his time," she said slowly, sitting forwards in her chair, "he reads it carefully. Right until the last second. When the guards arrive he destroys the evidence, but doesn't touch the envelope. He looks..."

"Like he knew," Will frowned, "let me see."

The footage was crisp and clear. Enough for Will to feel slightly strange as he watched. Hannibal sat at his desk as if it were simply a working day and he was sorting his files. He found the envelope and did not hesitate a beat before sticking his thumb into the corner and tearing it open in a swift slide. His eyes as they read showed curiosity and mild amusement. Then, as the sounds of running feet approached, Hannibal did what Will knew he would. He looked up into the camera and smiled before pushing the note into his mouth.

The stare cut into him. Will felt it as a physical thing against his skin. The sheer power of the man, even inside his cramped cell. He revelled in it. Knew that Will would see it.

Knew who he was looking at when he'd looked into that camera.

"Will he talk?" Crawford asked.

"For the right price," Will bit out acidly, breaking eye contact with the screen, "Christ this is the last sort of thing I wanted him to have."

"Meaning?"

"Power over us," Starling said; Will nodded sharply at her, "now he can make us dance."

"And that's if he ever gives us what we want," Will knew he was pacing, erratic footsteps taking him back and forth in an odd zigzag, "he'll draw this out, make it last. Enough that whatever he gives us will be useless by the time we have it. God *dammit!* This could have been it, could have been the end of this. Fucking Chilton, incompetent *bastard*."

"Will, cool it," Jack said sternly, "Starling, I want you to get everyone down here. Price, Katz, have Zeller make time. And then I need you to go and see Chilton, get everything you can from him. Maybe someone else will know something, the admin staff, they may be able to give us something."

"Right away," she said dutifully, though Will could see the resignation in her actions as she left. She knew, just as much as he did, that it was a futile act.

"Will, what's done is done. Now all we have is what's left. That's what we work with."

"Sure," Will said, forcing himself to stop dead still, "I know. I know that. Dammit. The envelope, what about the envelope?"

"It's gone to Katz in Hair and Fibre and Price for prints. If there's anything to find, they'll find it."

Waiting was torture. The clock mocked him as it ticked by time, seconds, minutes, into the hour. Will followed the security footage of Hannibal around the building, watching as it was analysed by the specialists, run through enhancement after enhancement, trying to see if they could make out the words through the reverse of the paper, catch it at the right angle, in just the right light. Half way through one of the visual enhancements Will had caught movement out the corner of his eye.

“He’s talking,” Will had said to Hillman, the visual analyst, “hey. Lecter, his lips are moving while he reads.”

“Yeah, I see it. Give me five minutes. I need to call Gary.”

Gary Fisher, a trained lip reader and audio tech, had joined them. The two men had sat, huddled together while Will leaned against the wall and tapped his fingers sequentially upon his jacket sleeve. Twenty four minutes later they had given Will their results, looking distinctly displeased.

“This is...” Will looked at the transcript and felt his shoulders slump, “god damn him.”

“It looks like he’s reciting a recipe for aioli.”

“Yeah,” Will said, “it seems he is.”

There were photo-stats and audio cds and close-ups and copies of originals, all taken in a fruitless effort to find out what was on the note. Will knew that there were only two men who knew: the Tooth Fairy and Lecter. And anyone else willing to play their game. Will took the lot to Zeller’s office and waited. It turned out he didn’t need to wait long.

“Well hello stranger.”

He had always lumped them all in together, his colleagues and his business partners and the PD’s he worked with over the years. *Everyone’s so damn glad you’ve finally leashed me*, he used to tell Hannibal after he’d quit.

Only it wasn’t entirely true. Not truly. Alana Bloom was an exception to that rule.

Another was Beverly Katz.

“H and F,” Will said with a quick quirk of his lips, eyes still trained on the evidence bags on the table before him, “how’ve you been?”

“God, there’s a nickname I haven’t heard in a while,” she said as she stood by the door to their temporary office, “and could probably go another few centuries without hearing again.”

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not, but that’s ok,” he looked up as she smiled. She looked the same as he’d last seen her, spookily so. Long black hair in a choppy cut, white shirt a little rumpled from living under her lab coat. He could see her sharp eyes taking in his full form and knew she saw it all, *the exhaustion, the fear, the guilt, the blank resignation*, “How’s your little one?”

“She’s good. She’s, uh, here actually. In Washington I mean.”

“I heard. About the leak to Lecter.”

“Yeah, thought most might’ve by now.”

“Safer in the home away from home, yeah? I know Marquez. She’s good. Quick, sharp. She’ll do you proud.”

“I hope so.”

“Did you see the article?”

That had his attention. Will frowned, finding Katz’s eyes and holding them.

“What article?”

“In the *Tattler*. Lounds is sniffing around again.”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” Will ground out, feeling his shoulder’s tighten, “please don’t stir up the *Tattler*. I can’t stand that god damned woman. The only other person who hates that rag more than me is Lecter.”

“Well it seems we might be a bit late to that party. She’s already got a crackpot story about you visiting Lecter at the Asylum. Some corny headline. Even a picture of you with that guy, what’s his name? Has the kid.”

“Jeff?” Will frowned worriedly.

“Yeah, that’s him. Has a little spiel on him too. I’m sure Jack’ll put a stop to it. Still, I think she’s angling to get your attention.”

“She won’t want my attention when she gets it,” Will said darkly, “maybe Jack can explain that to her.”

He would have said more but for the interruption of eight feet walking in past Katz and filling up the room. Starling looked purposeful but tired, Jack looked mildly harassed but hid it well, behind him walked Price looking as if he would rather be anywhere else, and then followed Brian Zeller. Will took in his suit and the multitude of new wrinkles rumpling his forehead since he’d last seen him.

“Will,” Brian said with a smart, polite smile, “been a while. Four..?”

“Five years,” Will corrected him, unable to make full eye contact.

“Right. Of course.”

“Section head now, I see. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, well maybe I would have taken that congratulations to heart last year when I got it. Sometimes I feel like it was a decade ago I was given this desk,” he was smiling to joke, but Will could see the truth of it in his eyes.

“You’re not allowed to complain,” Price said, taking a seat heavily and crossing his legs, “after all the bragging you got done.”

“Thanks Jimmy,” Brian shook his head, “good to know you still resent the hell out of me.”

“Sure thing,” Price smiled jauntily.

“Ok, so let’s get this started,” Brian said, ignoring the lure.

No sooner had Will sat down than Jack came straight out with it.

“Lecter’s asking for you.”

“Of course he is,” Will said, “of course he damn well is. Question is, how do we play this?”

“There’s no way to guarantee that he’ll talk and, if he does, that what he’ll give us isn’t a red herring,” Zeller said, “he’s a well documented and intelligent liar. He knows how to fool the polygraph and manipulate his tells.”

“I had thought...” Starling spoke up; she hesitated for a moment when all eyes swung to her. Will wished she’d have more confidence in herself, “I had thought that if the Tooth Fairy sent Lecter correspondence that he may have set up some way for Lecter to respond. If that’s true and we can find out how and when, we’ll have the perfect set up.”

“That’s a fair point,” Will said, “if we can get it.”

“I’ve printed the envelope,” Jimmy stepped in, “It’s clean.”

“Generic envelope, generic paper,” Beverly said, “Supplied all over the country. I did find traces of sponge caught in the fold. Think he might have used it so he didn’t need to lick the seal. We’ve traced it to a company called Amico, they do office supplies. I’ve requisitioned their sales for Atlanta and Birmingham for the past three months but I’m not sure how far it’ll get us.”

“That makes sense, there was no DNA present in the seal,” Zeller read from his report, “and Graphology told me it’s a woman’s handwriting. Blue biro.”

“So he has someone to write for him, but someone who he knows won’t leave any fingerprints on the envelope,” Will said, frowning at the table, “an accomplice? No, seems too risky for him. He’s shy, what he does is personal. So then a work colleague maybe? Where do you wear gloves as part and parcel of your job? Museum archives? Photography development?”

“We can try and get a narrowed down list,” Jack said, though he sounded doubtful, “until then, we’re focused on Lecter as our best lead but we don’t rule out anything else. Will?”

“I say we let him enjoy his little victory for a while. I’m not pandering to his beck and call.”

“Could be risky,” Jack noted, “he might make life difficult for us if we don’t play by his rules.”

“Tomorrow,” Will said, the slow filtering of an idea blossoming in his mind; it bit at him, gnawing at his moral standard, “give me till tomorrow. I’ll think of something.”

The rain was torrential. Will didn't think he'd ever seen monsoon rain like it in the south on the dry east coast. He sat before the mirror in the bathroom, cold and shaking, listening to the rain batter the window and roof. He had pulled the curtains until only a sliver of light remained, relishing the almost darkness. It was important to prepare.

Goose bumps raised on his arms and legs. He stared at his naked body and felt as if his mind was disconnected from the flesh before his eyes. Ants across his skin would have been less irritating than the crawling itch that fished about his body, making his insides squirm.

Will stared at himself and wished it would end.

"You still in there?" came a shout accompanied by three loud knocks; his father's heavy hand.

Will flinched at the noise and kept quiet.

"Better be ready in half an hour or there'll be hell to pay," his father warned, "can't keep a suitor waiting."

The shower was excruciating and yet wonderful, the heat calming his shaking nerves, yet the power of the water against his skin a constant annoyance. He dried using a soft towel and a gentle heat for his sodden hair. His father had laid out a suit for him. Will ignored it, instead rummaging through his wardrobe for the softest thing he could find. A blue cashmere sweater he'd bought by luck at a thrift shop and grey jogging bottoms.

"I can't today," he said as he crept into the kitchen; his father was seated by the backdoor, the sound of the rain loud on the porch. He turned, disappointment in his eyes.

"Ain't got much of a choice."

"I'm not...I can't today," Will reiterated, "it's too close."

"You're not in full for another week. It'll hold."

"I don't feel right."

"Will you stop worrying, boy? You'll be fine."

The itch of his heat had crawled into his brain and began to move around, irritating his thoughts. Don't want to do this, don't make me do this, *was all he could think. It was easiest to simply sit down at the kitchen table and wait, the hard wood sore against his sensitive skin. When the knock finally came it was at the front door. Will watched as his father stood up and walked through into the living room, heard the door open and the sound of voices.*

He relaxed for the few moments he had, closing his eyes and remembering how he wanted this to go. Then Will caught a hot, crisp, almost savoury smell on the air. His pupils widened and his mouth fell partly open. When the group of people eventually walked into the room, his

father, a tall woman with red hair and an older man dressed in green, Will could only ignore them and stare at the fourth.

He was about heads with him in height. Dark hair, almost black, with tanned skin beneath. Blue eyes and a passable face above a strong jaw. He was wearing a white polo neck and brown chinos. There was an air of authority around him that Will hated on sight, yet the focus of those blue eyes was almost enough to send him over the edge, and the smell coming from him a close second.

"This is my son William," the sound of the unfamiliar name broke his reverie; his father only called him as such when being formal. Will managed to glance at the pair who had accompanied the young man, clearly his mother and grandfather by their genetic similarities. Will had always prided himself on his powers of observation.

"Nice to meet you," Will mumbled, bringing his arms up around his torso and avoiding their eyes.

"He's awful shy," the older man commented bluntly, "seventeen you said?"

"That's right," his father said warily, "can I get you anything?"

"No thank you," the woman smiled; she seemed more personable yet Will could see the same business-like manner in her, "maybe we could sit down and have a chat?"

"Right, of course, maybe the living room," his father had never been the best of hosts, "why don't we leave the young ones to get to know each other?"

Will looked to his father, eyes intense with worry. His father avoided his gaze. He listened to the voices retreat into the living room and tried to make himself look small, inconspicuous. It was difficult when he was one of the only two in the room. The sound of a cleared throat drew his gaze. He found himself looking at a set of pink lips, smiling lightly, as the other man sat down across from him.

"You know, my mom likes to make grand entrances," the man said, his voice cultured and refined yet casual, New England with a hint of Boston in his a's, "but she's not so great at the introductions. I'm Max."

Will looked at the hand as it was extended to him. Reaching up to take it was both a task and an exercise in restraint. There was a visceral need to grab that hand and run his nose along the delicate skin of his wrist, to drag in more of that intense scent. Instead he shook it weakly, retracting his hand as if the touch had burned, "Will."

"So I gathered," the man sounded amused, "I saw your picture, but I'd never have guessed you were seventeen. My mom's been looking for a while, you know, for someone suitable. I guess your dad has too?" When Will stayed quiet he continued, "You just finishing school?"

"Finished," Will said, linking his hands together, "I went in a year early because of my birthday, it's just after the cut off date."

“Right,” Max’s smile turned charming, showed teeth; Will felt the need to roll his head, show his neck. The thought was sickening when he intercepted the reflex. Oh god I’m doing it, aren’t I? The thought made him hot under the collar, “so you planning on college? Not sure if you read my proposal?” Will shook his head, “So I guess I should just tell you, huh? I’m twenty two, studying at Yale...”

“Law?” Will interrupted, avoiding the question.

“Yeah,” Max laughed, the sound a shiver up Will’s spine; it wasn’t a nice sound, “everyone always gets it in one.”

Will felt the itch begin to scramble. He drew in a deep breath and, in a longed for moment, felt himself relax as the suppressants he’d taken an hour before finally kicked in. The shivering in his limbs abated. His pupils retracted. The itch in his skin stuttered out of existence. He smiled attractively. Staring into those blue eyes was a hell of a lot easier when he felt as if he were suddenly stalking the predator instead of at its mercy, “You’re a long way from home, Max.”

The change was obvious. He knew it was, because Max didn’t look so very sure of himself anymore.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m from...”

“Boston,” Will interrupted.

“I...” Max frowned, “that’s right. If you didn’t read my proposal how’d you..?”

“It’s all there in your vowels.”

“That’s a neat trick,” Max conceded, even though his eyes said that he wasn’t impressed. Young alphas usually weren’t when their dominance was brought into question. It never paid to be a clever omega in the wolf’s den.

Only Will never considered himself in the wolf’s den.

“Not a trick,” Will leaned back in his chair and couldn’t stop himself from letting his legs splay; he saw Max’s eyes jump down, his nostrils flaring, “just observation. What’s the eleventh amendment?”

“What?” Max looked caught out.

“I asked you what the eleventh amendment is. You said you’re twenty two. If you’re taking the J.D. law at Yale then that’s three years, you should be well into it by now.”

“Wow, and here I thought I was on holiday,” Max said, his smile no longer reaching his eyes, “but now comes a pop quiz.”

“Ok, how about Redressibility?” Will said, unable to hide his condescension. Max bristled visibly, “No? The Collateral Bar Rule? Wow. Nothing huh?”

"You know that's rich coming from a down home little country boy fresh out of school."

"Oh, so the claws do *come out," Will smiled, shark-like.*

"You like to play games," Max smirked, "I can deal with that."

"Not the sort of games you'd enjoy."

"Oh I don't know. I think I can read you pretty well. Like playing up the poor little omega for daddy, yeah? Only you don't smell quite right. Suppressants?"

"I'm guessing you recognise the smell because you get it a lot," Will said, still smiling as he narrowed his eyes; probably all the potential mates wearing blocker pheromones around this one. He must be a real charmer.

"Well I never get any complaints, if that's what you're insinuating."

"Oh, I don't insinuate," Will said bluntly, "in fact I'm thinking you're either a terrible candidate for attorney or your rich parents bought you a spot."

"What did you just say?" breathed out, as if the man had never had a brazen insult levelled at him in his life.

"Or maybe you're just coasting on good looks. I wouldn't hold out for more on that front. Let me guess, the boys and girls let you buy them drinks but it never goes farther than that. A constant best friend basis. Your lecturers tolerate you but you're never selected for placements, projects, you get passed over for questions. And there's a niggling sense of doubt in you, somewhere deep down, worries you might never succeed at what your father did before you, and your grandfather probably did before him. Maybe even your mother?" Max flinched, "Ah yes, a family of barristers. And their disappointing child."

Will could remember seeing two men argue in a bar when he was twelve. Unable to hear their words he'd made do with sitting by his father and watching. The look of unmitigated rage in their eyes had frightened him then. When they'd thrown fists he'd gripped his father's arm and stayed close, the violence and the hate too near, as if he could feel the heat of it against his skin.

Now, he was no longer scared. When that same violent hatred seeped into Max's eyes, Will simply returned the stare with casual indifference.

"Which is why you're here, right? To make your mark. Get through with a reasonable degree which you certainly don't deserve and make your mark. *I'd make a damn good trophy, wouldn't I? Unless of course there's another reason you've travelled hundreds of miles to claim me?"*

"I'm beginning to wonder," Max said with a tightness to rival taught piano wire, "I knew your proposal was too good to be true. Always the damn same. Too clever for your own class. Don't know your place."

“Oh I know my place. It’s taking your degree and your job and doing it better than you ever could.”

“You son of a bitch,” Max said quietly, furious; the smell intensified. Will had to resist the urge to throw himself at the man’s feet and rub his face against his knees, even with the suppressants coursing in his system, “breaking you is going to be so damn sweet.”

“Right,” Will smiled, reaching forwards, “except I’m pretty sure,” he took Max by surprise, grabbing a handful of his obvious erection and squeezing, “that you don’t have the equipment.”

The blow was what he’d been waiting for, stark and hot and ringing against the side of his face. Will fell from his chair, pulling it with him in a clatter. He could taste the blood in his mouth, hear the sound of feet, could see Max standing over him as his vision blurred. The lustful rage in Max’s eyes was perfect. Will whimpered, curling in and down, shielding his head.

“Please, don’t hurt me!”

“You fucking piece of shit!” Max managed to get one kick in, square in the solar plexus. Will felt the wind rush from him, coughing and hacking. The blood from his cut lip dripped onto the floor as Max was hauled back by the older man and Will felt his father’s hands on his shoulders.

“Will! My god, are you alright?”

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, “please I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You liar! He’s a goddamn liar, I didn’t..!”

“Max, shut your mouth,” the woman said sternly.

“How dare you, how dare *you!” his father was shouting.*

“Mr Graham, I’m so sorry, he’s never usually...” the woman tried to placate.

“You talk to me like that again, I’ll have you fucking dealt with!” Max was still shouting.

“Get out of my house!” his father roared, “All of you, get out!”

After they had gone Will had allowed his father to console him, holding his son gently and telling him how sorry he was. That he’d never let his son be taken by an abusive, hot headed young buck with no sense for proprietary. Will had soon tired of it. He’d made his excuses and his father didn’t seem to have the heart to refuse him.

Will stood in the bathroom and stared into the mirror, licking at his split lip. He rubbed tenderly at the spectacular bruise that was beginning to blossom at the top of his abdomen.

It had been worth it. Another bullet dodged. Will Graham smiled and brushed his teeth.

The house was quiet by the time he arrived. Will checked his watch and sighed. Half two in the morning. He chewed at his lip and considered waking Elle just to see her sleepy eyes and her smile. She would hug him and ask to sleep in his bed, and he could tell her a story as they drifted off...

He decided against it as he climbed the stairs to the front door. He wasn't in a fit state to see her face, to fall back onto the domestic side. Too much dark work on his mind.

Marquez answered the door, efficient as ever. He was beginning to believe Beverly's hype. The woman was professional even when woken at an ungodly hour.

His room felt cold and empty. Will took off his jacket and draped it over the back of the lone chair, toeing off his shoes and putting them by the door. Then he lay out flat on the bed, on top of the duvet, and thought about things as rationally as he could.

It didn't help. Will closed his eyes. Hannibal's intense stare from the CCTV camera waited behind his eyelids. *Your move*, *dear Will,* they said. He frowned, feeling his heart race with hate and anger and resentment and not a little bit of sheer, blind excitement. Will had always found it difficult to resist Hannibal's dares.

He's taking whole families, he reminded himself, *he'll kill again and it will be worse, so much worse*. This is bigger than just you.

Will pulled his mobile from his pants pocket and dialed. He could hear the faint ring from down the corridor. It rang five times before it was answered.

"Hey," Jeff said.

"You sound awake."

"I am awake, have been awake. Haven't been to sleep I mean. When did you get in?"

"About ten minutes ago."

"Jesus, they're working you ragged."

"I'm ok. I am. Did Susan come get Anthony?"

"Yeah. She did," Jeff sounded a little tight, "she, uh, she said to say she was sorry."

"What? What for?"

"For calling you a fucking asshole."

"She called me that, huh."

"Yeah. Then she said she was sorry."

“Well, I guess that makes up for it.”

Always make them think it’s their idea, his training told him, *and then you won’t be open to suspicion.* Will felt like shit for even thinking it. Jeff’s voice was tired but resolute. Will wished the man knew him better, then maybe he would have left with his wife when he had the chance.

“So, you’re still here.”

“Didn’t I say I would be?”

“You did. I just...”

“You’re real paranoid, you know that?”

“Yup.”

“And you sound like crap.”

“I’m lonely.”

“Uh huh.”

“And horny.”

“I’m in the next room.”

“So’s Ellie, across the hall. Marquez is in the other.”

“Then we’ll have to be quiet,” Jeff said in a blunt yet teasing tone, “won’t we.”

Hook, line and sinker, the voice said. Will flapped it away with an agitated hand and then felt crazy for doing it.

“I don’t remember being loud with you before,” he said as a distraction.

“You don’t remember much from before at all.”

“True.”

“Neither do I. Maybe we should rectify that.”

Will laughed quietly, desperately. It was an old joke, only really a half-joke, between them. Will remembered, *touches and kisses and pushing down guilt and resentment and wanting and needing so badly that it had driven them together,* and he knew Jeff did too.

“What are we doing, huh?”

“Each other, hopefully soon.”

“God,” Will laughed again, louder this time, “this is crazy. Let’s do it.”

Sneaking through felt like betrayal, though he wasn't sure who to. Truthfully he was beyond giving a shit. *Elle was asleep, Marquez was a grown woman, Susan had left Milo and Hannibal could go and choke for all he cared.* Or at least that's what Will told himself.

He was painfully aware of the man he'd left out of the list. Will didn't want to think about that. So he didn't.

Jeff was lying half propped up against the headboard on the single bed when he entered, duvet kicked off. It was crammed into the corner of the gloomy room, dark but for the bedside lamp. Jeff's rumpled white t-shirt caught the light, riding up over his grey boxers, showing a strip of tanned skin. Will thought he looked a little bit irresistible, *casual yet out of place.* His right hand was stuffed behind his head, and in his left was a worn copy of *Foucault's Pendulum*. There was a warm smell of hot metal in the air, coming from the electric radiator by the cupboard. Will leaned against the wall as he shut the door.

Suddenly it was difficult not to feel awkward. In their previous encounters, few enough that he could count them on one hand, alcohol had made it seem easy. Now, not so much. He nodded at the book.

"Heavy reading for the occasion," Will commented.

"It was the first thing I grabbed."

"I'd forgotten about that damned bed."

"Yeah? More than enough room," Jeff said, his smile a little lopsided and reticent; he folded the page he was on and put the book to one side while Will sat down by his feet, "you know, I wasn't entirely thinking clearly, because I could have sworn on the phone a couple of minutes back you were talking about fucking," Will laughed and Jeff's smiled widened, "but this might be kind of difficult. Or have you..?"

"These nice little pills I got a few months back," Will interrupted, reaching out to run his hand up Jeff's left leg, the blonde hairs there rising at the touch; their eyes met, "reflex suppressants. Never had the chance to try them out," he skipped quickly over the part where he was sure Jeff wanted to ask *why* Will had bought them at all, "Beats being drunk any day, huh?"

"I don't know," Jeff swallowed, "guess we'd better find out."

"Sure you're ok with this?"

"Shit, Will, you're driving me crazy sitting over there. C'mere. And take off your damn clothes."

It took less time than Will had expected. The kiss had led to being pulled forwards onto the bed had led to slowly being slipped from his clothes had led to running his hands over hot skin had led to the two of them rutting against each other, panting, trying to stay quiet.

It had all fallen down to instinct. On the slim bed he slid into his Lordosis reflex without thinking too much about what it was he wanted and who from; Jeff had taken the hint. Kneeling behind him Jeff rolled his hips forwards, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth as he sank inside. Will gripped the sheets and breathed through his nose.

“Fuck,” Jeff said in a loud whisper as he pushed forwards and Will’s fingers curled tighter and tighter, “*fuck*.”

Everything spiralled back to memories deeply implanted, *of Hannibal embracing him as they made love, the rabid red scratch marks along his thighs when they’d mated in a rut, the sheer wanton need that came over him whenever he caught scent of Hannibal during his heat, of his mate losing control and allowing Will to watch, to see, to be with him at his most vulnerable.*

Memories of easier times because, back then, the world had been simply them and nothing more. No more had been necessary. Now, here, the world seemed to be crushing down to that same bubble, a pinprick of existence caught inside that sparsely furnished second floor room in an FBI safe house in Washington. Will felt that years of near celibacy also hadn’t helped.

“Need you,” he’d pleaded mindlessly, “want you. Deeper.”

“Trying my best, hot stuff,” Jeff breathed as he bent over, resting down across Will’s back; Will could feel his breath tickling at his neck, “god you smell fuck-able.”

“Then maybe you aughta,” Will breathed.

“Way ahead of you.”

It was hot and fast and everything Will wanted. For a moment, achingly white as Jeff came inside him, Will didn’t think of anything but where he was and what was happening; a blind, mindless glory. Afterwards they lay together, Will cradled against Jeff’s left side, legs entwined, stuffed onto the slim bed but seeming unable to care about the lack of space. Will lay his head against the front of Jeff’s shoulder. Jeff ran his fingers absently up and down over the back of Will’s neck.

“Should shower,” Jeff muttered.

“That involves getting up.”

“Yeah, sure does. So I’ll take it you’re feeling better?”

“More than better,” Will mumbled through a regretful smile, reaching over to gently squeeze Jeff’s spent cock, “don’t sell yourself short.”

“Ah, son of bitch,” he laughed tiredly, “don’t that’s...ah. Too much too fast, honey.”

“You think I’m asking for a second show?”

“Second show might be tricky. Give me half an hour and I’ll do my encore.”

Will laughed again, sleepily, leaning in to kiss the soft skin behind Jeff's ear, his left hand trailing up through the sweat dampened hair on his stomach.

"I think the audience might have fallen asleep by then."

"Don't worry," Jeff smiled, eyes closed, "I'll wake you up."

It would have been pretty near perfect. It would have been, if Will had allowed it to be.

Hosting a party of dullards, social climbers and pseudo-intellectuals was both tiring and beneath him yet, for the sake of Alana Bloom, Hannibal had decided to suffer it.

It hadn't taken much planning, which was always a bad start. Hannibal admired strict and complex planning above most other things. The careful placement of pieces upon pieces, next to and opposite from others, with the correct levels of everything involved to create a perfect blend.

The feast he'd hosted three weeks prior had been a prime example. The menu delicately formed from fish, flesh and sweetness, with an array of like minds, a talented cellist and the wonderful freshness of the blood for the black pudding in his starter.

Jeremy Olmstead had been another perfect example. Just the right amount of replication in his brutality. Hannibal nodded politely to his guests as he passed through the crowd searching for the lady who had forced this unpleasantness upon him.

Of course one more chisel or railway spike would have been too much. Olmstead was a testament to his restraint. Hannibal smiled. Remembering was almost as potent as the act. As he casually placed his hand on a passerby to steer them out of his path, he imagined the same force that had been needed to drive the chisel through Olmstead's sternum. It sang like a nightingale; melancholy but irresistible.

She was easy to find because of the grating red hue of her dress. The value of the colour was too high. Hannibal disliked it but was too polite to say so. Alana was not interesting to him because of her dress sense after all. If she had been then he would never had even considered this party. She stood with her back to him, facing two other men, only one of whom he recognised.

Hannibal smiled demurely and inserted himself smartly into the conversation as it lulled.

"I do hope I have not been neglecting you," he said, handing Alana a flute of champagne from a passing waiter when he realised she had none.

"Oh, of course not," she said, smiling widely; so eager to please, Hannibal thought with amusement, how should I resist? "I did wonder where you'd got to."

"So many lost souls to ferry," Hannibal said, nodding to Crawford, "Jack, wonderful to see you out of your office."

“Isn’t it?” Crawford grinned, looking to the other man at his right, “Was beginning to think we’d become part of the furniture.”

“If I begin resembling a photocopier I hope you’ll have the decency to tell me,” the unknown man said wryly.

The man was shorter than he by a few inches, yet seemed infinitely smaller in stature. His hair was an ordered chaos of curls and waves in rich, chocolate brown. Beneath them sat a pair of thick rimmed glasses, behind which he hid intelligent, grey eyes that refused to meet anyone’s gaze. His suit was well worn and unfitting for the occasion, a grey jacket and brown trousers with a cheap blue shirt beneath.

In a sea of boring repetitious people with little to no wonder about them, Hannibal found himself intrigued.

“How rude of me,” he said, openly staring at his unknown guest, “I have not introduced myself.”

“Oh, I should have,” Alana said quickly, “Hannibal this is Will Graham. He’s a colleague of Jack's in the BAU. Will, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, my mentor.”

“A pleasure,” Hannibal said, inclining his head; Will kept his stare somewhere around the rim of his champagne flute.

“Nice to meet you,” Hannibal thought Will trotted the nicety out like a party trick, as if to fool people into thinking he was capable.

“Will’s been working with us on the Chesapeake Ripper case,” Jack said, “has quite the insight.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal asked.

“Jack,” Alana said with a subtle warning tone beneath her smile, “I thought we were staying away from Quantico tonight.”

“I too have been marginally involved with this manhunt,” Hannibal managed to say the word with a straight face, “Agent Crawford has been foolish enough to believe me an asset.”

“You sell yourself short Doctor,” Jack said with a laugh, “I should really have introduced you two earlier. Shouldn’t be doing this here, I suppose. Still. Will was sort of pulled into this with less enthusiasm.”

“Ah, then you have been roped in, as they say,” Hannibal said, looking to him.

“Just watching the goose chase from the box seats.”

He could feel the dislike for the turn in conversation in the way Alana crossed one arm over the other, resting her champagne in a loose hand. Still, the intrigue beckoned him closer. There was a subtle scent to this man, this Will Graham, that was making the hairs on his arms rise. A subtle hint of rosewater and rancid skin.

“So you believe the hunt to be futile?”

“I didn’t say that,” Will said, still refusing to meet his eyes though he had progressed from staring into his drink to looking at Hannibal’s tie. Lecter took it as a win on his part, “we’re not incompetent, he’s just difficult to pin down.”

“I thought we were getting somewhere with Gideon,” Alana cut in, sounding impatient and yet with a need to contribute, “the Ripper hasn’t killed in two years, right around the time Gideon was arrested. Dissociative personality disorder, psychopathic tendencies. He’s a prime candidate.”

“Gideon’s not the Ripper,” Will said with a blunt surety.

“So you keep telling us,” Jack said with a sigh.

“For one he mutilated that nurse in the Asylum post mortem. The Chesapeake Ripper usually does that sort of thing during, not after. Also he’s conceited and fuzzy on some of the main points, trying to hide it under a layer of pretentious inscrutability. But most of all,” Will took a drink of champagne and grimaced as he stared accusingly at his glass, as if he detested the stuff but felt a need to fit in, “he’s just not that clever.”

Hannibal thought he might have leaned marginally closer on instinct, breathed in a little heavier. It was difficult to fathom; where had this wondrous creature slunk from? A vile den in the woods, far from civilisation. That was how Hannibal Lecter saw Will Graham’s mind as he observed him. For a few seconds the rest of the room became dark, leaving them alone in a focus of eyes and scent. Will seemed to sense the subtle shift in Hannibal’s intensity and cleared his throat. He shifted on his feet to put some more distance between them.

“Then you think Gideon needs to believe he is the Ripper?” he asked with curiosity.

“Well, it’s certainly what somebody needs.”

The scent sharpened. Hannibal thought his salivary glands may have secreted a little too much. He swallowed, turning his head away, back to the front. The scent was beginning to take form in his mind. Ah*, he thought,* so obvious, how could I have missed it? *The rancid stench under the flowery scent; a cocktail of suppressants hiding the man’s identity.*

“Then perhaps Dr. Gideon wishes to meet the true Ripper,” he said, “to convince his psyche that it is not as splintered as he has been led to believe. A like minded banquet.”

“I’m sure he’d just love that,” Will smiled sharply, keeping his eyes hidden behind his glasses and under a fall of chocolate curls, “maybe you could throw Chilton in there as well. Spice things up a little. The Ripper would like that. Think I might too.”

There was a notable pause. Hannibal thought he might want to reach out and touch him, make sure he was not an apparition of some sort. They all watched as the young man moved his eyes around between their feet, clearing his throat noticeably.

“Sorry,” Will smiled grimly, “no talking shop at parties. My mistake. I think I should get myself another drink.”

There was a tense silence as he turned and walked off, stiff backed. Hannibal found it difficult not to stare, to watch every minute move of his body language as it screamed in the crowded room. There was a fierceness to him, a want to be utterly alone within the horde. *He turned back to find Alana and Jack Crawford looking elsewhere, rolling the stems of their glasses between tight fingertips. Hannibal found it almost irresistible to laugh out loud. Instead he spoke, calm and pleased.*

“A most intriguing perspective,” Hannibal said.

“One way of putting it,” Crawford looked as if he were debating whether he should have denied it, “One of my best profilers, but he’s better in the background, if you get me. Not one we usually let out at social events.”

“I see,” Hannibal felt his amusement rising; such petty little fools, eyes too narrow to see the world around them. *He tested the name in his mind,* Will Graham. *Short for William he was sure. A good, strong name, for a scared, awkward and yet highly strung and independent individual, “then..?”*

“I invited him. I know him, through work,” Alana explained, “he’s a great guy, once you get past all the awkward social niceties.”

“I am sure he is,” Hannibal said, smiling into his next sip; he frowned lightly at Crawford, “though I must admit, Jack, quite a risk.”

“He is a constant chore at parties,” Crawford said with a soft snort.

“I was thinking more of his omega status,” Hannibal said bluntly, “this sort of work must be hellish for him. I am sure your psychiatric bills are through the roof. Perhaps that is how you know him Alana?”

He knew he was being stared at incredulously by both, each for different reasons. Hannibal took a moment to revel. It was always such a delight to see people struggle not to be shocked by his sudden lack of tact. Alana spoke first.

“Hannibal, that’s not...” she looked momentarily appalled; he looked at her questioningly, and she seemed to calm, “please don’t start studying him. He really, really won’t appreciate it.”

“Apologies,” he said, “I did not mean to cause offence. It is merely something I have picked up on. There was a fascinating article in Dynamics and Biology Quarterly. *‘Mirror Neuron Affluence and Male Omega Physiology’. It seems they are truly susceptible to the inside of their own heads.”*

“I haven’t read it,” Alana said tightly; Hannibal found her jealousy mildly curious.

“I must pass a copy on to you.”

“I’d ask how you knew he was omega...” Jack started.

“But I am sure I would only be embarrassing myself,” Hannibal smiled demurely. He looked down, finding his glass empty, “ah, it seems Mr. Graham is not the only one dry at the watering hole. Please, excuse me.”

Going straight to the bar would have been thoughtless and naive. Hannibal made a point of steering away, following the vague scent of Will Graham through the crowd. It was difficult to follow in the mass of heady perfumes and aftershave, yet the bitter tinge to the air gave constant pointers. Eventually Hannibal found himself at the door to the balcony.

The air was chill. Graham stood in the corner, looking out over the bay with its bright lights and black water. The glow from inside was paltry beyond the glass, leaving the balcony gloomy. Back-lit, he looked slightly unreal, as if he were simply a silhouette cut out of the night skyline. Hannibal walked forwards and stood to his left, observing the view; there was a good three feet between them. As the door swung closed behind him Hannibal watched Will reach out over the balcony's edge, hand holding the shimmering champagne flute, and simply let go. Two seconds later a soft shattering echoed up from below, followed by silence. Hannibal felt a need to speak, but knew it was more telling to let Graham give his offerings first. He knew a power play when he saw one, and the thought made his mouth tick into a smile.

“If you’ve come to complain about my dress code, I hate to disappoint but I’d rather jump,” Graham offered eventually.

“And yet the paperwork would be truly drastic for such a dramatic overreaction,” Hannibal said, looking down over the edge of the balcony. Below the trees swayed in the dark, beneath them the concrete of the car park was a dull glow in the streetlights, littered with shards of glass, “and I believe the fall would not kill you. A few broken limbs perhaps.”

“Now that would be disappointing.”

“Such a morbid outlook.”

“Please, I’m sure Alana’s already said something. She likes to say something, wherever we go. Don’t psychoanalyse me,” Graham said acerbically through a smile, “you won’t like me when I’m psychoanalysed.”

“I agree. I believe I like no one once I have psychoanalysed them either.”

A surprising and sudden laugh. Graham looked taken aback by his own reaction, frowning down at the balcony railing. He looked up to his left; the gaze stuttered near his neck for a few seconds and then, for a flash, caught his eyes and held them. Then it was gone, back out into the surrounding dark. Hannibal relished the sudden intensity of their connection through the simple act of eye contact.

“If you think an ambush will work best, feel free,” Will continued.

“Oh, I only ambush when I’m hungry.”

“Come to feast? I don’t think you’ll find me that tasty.”

“With all those suppressants in your system, I am not surprised.”

“Makes life easier,” Graham shrugged, “you should try it. Although I guess your lot don’t need to reclaim your stigma.”

“Your senses are certainly keen,” Hannibal observed.

“I can smell you from here.”

“I will take that as a compliment.”

“Do whatever you like.”

Oh do not fear, Hannibal smiled as he leaned against the railing and felt the cold metal against his palms, I always do. With that he took his glass, held it out over the balcony's edge and, without hesitation, let go. He felt Will move forwards slightly. As the glass tinkled into pieces on the carpark concrete, Hannibal Lecter watched Will Graham as he, in turn, watched the glass settle. Next to him, Will sniffed, folding his arms against the rail and smiled as he leaned forwards.

"Whoever leaves first, their tyres are going to regret it," Will posited, sounding not in the least remorseful.

"Let's hope it is not your estemed colleagues," Hannibal said, tipping his head towards Will, "that would take some explaining."

"I thought this was your party? You're a terrible host."

"I have insurance," Hannibal shrugged non-chalantly.

Another laugh, this time softer but more genuine. Hannibal did not risk turning his head to look for the reaction he had garnered. He did not want to douse this delightful little flame he had found, flickering in the dark.

They stood together and talked for forty minutes, or so Hannibal discovered when he checked his watch later. Will spent most of the time making cleverly snide remarks and laughing at Hannibal's retorts while Hannibal talked as if nothing were amiss. He enjoyed himself immensley until they were finaly found by a rather peeved Alana Bloom. Unfortunately, neither of them had the tact to look guilty about their absence.

There was a visceral delight in walking down the white on white corridor this time. Not the same as before, when his hands had sweated and he’d felt ill with the thought of how far he was from the man he craved like a drug. This time, there was vindication sitting beneath his sense of duty.

Truthfully Will just hoped his gamble paid off. He knew how sharply intelligent Hannibal was, how difficult he was to fool and how quick he was to pick up on a ploy. There was no guarantee it would work. But then there was no guarantee it wouldn't either.

When he sat down this time it was with all the grace he was capable of, which wasn't much at all. Hannibal was seated at his desk, side on, clay in his hands. Will saw the fingers freeze momentarily and, with a slick absolution on seeing the familiar gesture, Hannibal's upper lip jerked upwards in a pouted twitch.

"What?" Will was unable to stop himself from asking as he rummaged through the file he'd brought, "No clever quips about my aftershave this time?"

"I believe there is nothing clever to say," Hannibal said, meeting Will's gaze. They held steady, watching. Eventually Will spoke.

"Then what is it you want? You wanted me here? Here I am."

"If only it were that simple."

"Sometimes it is. Only I think this might be the-wait, is it? Yes. Yes it is, the *second* time since you were brought here that you've requested my presence. Both in the past two weeks. Never before, and I doubt never after. So what is it Hannibal? What do you want from me?"

"I would have thought that would be obvious, but then I am beginning to think I have made myself a paltry and predictable creature by asking you here. Is that what you think of me, Will?"

"I think you're wasting my time," Will stood and purposefully flapped his coat closed, making to button it up; the rush of air pushed towards the cell surely contained everything Hannibal would have been trying to ignore. The scent of another riddling Will's skin, *sweat, saliva, semen.* Will knew Hannibal had almost unlimited reserves of patience and nerves. Except for this unprecedented and, on Hannibal's part, surely unwelcome chink in his armour.

As a male omega Will had been forced to adapt to his environment, use his abilities to his advantage, learn to live with his biology and use it for his own means. As an overly privileged alpha Hannibal had never needed to. His arrogance was the only thing Will thought he had any good chance of exploiting.

Which was vindicated when Hannibal called after him as he walked off, "So, I take it you couldn't see my love letter."

Will hovered on the verge of leaving, still facing the door. He licked his lips and put his left hand to his hip, letting out a small, derisive laugh. Finally he turned back and walked to his chair, but did not sit.

"I never thought I would have seen you fall to such petty measures to get my attention."

“Nor I of you,” Hannibal smiled as Will flinched, “or did you purposefully not shower because you enjoy reeking of another?”

“I don’t really mind it, no,” Will said tightly, “beats the ship on a bottle any day, huh?”

“I am beginning to regret my hasty review of your aftershave. I am starting to miss it.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“I’ll admit, I did put a bit of a damper on our relationship. It was entirely unintentional, not that you’ll believe my sincerity, I’m sure.”

“You brought me here,” Will managed to stop himself from shouting the words, knowing it would be too much, “to tell me you’re *sorry?”*

“That would be crass of me to do so. Does it seem likely?”

“You know it kinda does.”

“Another wounded moment of my pride for the collection. I do keep setting myself up for your witty comebacks. Should I be keeping score?”

“Keeping score,” Will hissed, “you bastard. You utter bastard, why is this all a game to you, huh? Why have I always been such a god damned game to you? Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because you’re mine,” Hannibal said succinctly, his eyes hardening.

“I’m not yours,” he knew he was shouting now, the panic showing on his face, “I was never yours. Don’t try and play me, Hannibal. You’ll get burned.”

“Oh, dear Will,” Hannibal let out a small, almost inaudible laugh, his eyes crinkling, “if only you could see yourself.”

“Shut up.”

“Such beauty in your chaos. Where has it gone? You seem so mundane now, beyond these bars.”

“I said *shut your mouth!*”

“All shades of brown and grey. You used to be so radiant. If you want to squander yourself on some paltry little beta, feel free. I hear he’s an oceanographer, with a neat little family of wife and son. How quaint.”

The words were like music to his ears. His anger flicked off like a light switch. Will had them almost memorised, all the articles that had been written up in the past couple of weeks in relation to the Tooth Fairy, Lecter and himself. He’d trained himself what to listen for. Hearing Freddie Lounds' words come out of Hannibal Lecter’s mouth was almost indecorous.

Will would have made a quip, before all this had happened, and Hannibal would have berated him mildly, followed by a soft kiss.

Would have.

Here and now, Will was offered a unique and justified view. Hannibal seemed to have picked up on Will's sudden, calm silence and then, in an utterly beautiful moment, Will saw the second tick by where Hannibal realised his blunder. There was a smile, sharp and impressed. Hannibal's eyes wandered around his cell, as if observing the life he had built there but seeing for miles beyond each wall as he ran his gaze over them. When he finally looked back to Will he was smiling in the face of Will's utter composure.

"Enjoy your *Tattler* this week, Doctor?"

"It is always an exercise in caution, conversing with you. I had forgotten; have become dulled by the fools that plague me."

"Maybe you can take some time and reflect on that," Will said casually, "you've little else to do otherwise, it seems."

Hannibal stared at him as a starving man stares at a three course meal, "You are a delight. An utter delight, Will Graham."

"Oh I know," Will smiled flatly, "I know it."

Hannibal's praise followed him out of the Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane like a bad smell.

"Jack? Yeah, it's Will. It's the *Tattler*. That's how Lecter was supposed to reply. Yeah. No I'm sure. Believe me. I know. I *know*. I won't go anywhere near Lounds. You deal with them, ok? I'll be back soon."

Standing beside his rental beneath the overcast sky in the shadow of the Asylum, Will Graham drummed his hands against the bonnet and allowed himself to feel an all encompassing, hot, slick jolt of utter victory.

No matter how fleeting.

And the Abyss Gazes Back into You

Chapter Notes

> By Jove, is anyone else bloody excited for Hannibal series 3? I, for one, CERTAINLY AM! To tide you over until it's UK release date on the 10th June feel free to indulge in this lovely new chapter while we wait for more terribly sophisticated gore (unless you've already seen it in another country with better television, in which case I envy you greatly).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There's a...I don't know how to put it, a *meaning* behind what he's doing. It isn't just mindless slaughter. It's thought out, planned through. The Leeds and the Jacobis were both taken on full moon nights. There's power there, for some, power to draw on. He's planning this to some mad lunar cycle. And it's personal. So close to him. Something he was denied for a long time. That's why it was so brutal at first. The Jacobis are less..." he searched for the word, "subtle than the Leeds. The Leeds are a culmination of years upon years of *holding back*. It's pain, Jack, it's raw pain in its purest form. And love. Just not love as we know it, or want it."

"Heard you talk like this before, Will."

The room was empty but for them; a rarity. Will had taken advantage and was now regretting how lost he'd allowed himself to become. There was a pregnant pause above the boardroom malaise of papers, laptops and half finished bad take-out. Jack Crawford stared at him across the tabletop. Will wasn't extending the same courtesy.

"Don't start on that with me," Will said, eyes down as he continued to root through the papers.

"Hobbs got to you, and it started like this. You saw it through his eyes. Used to tell us how he felt when he did it. Then you pumped him with a full clip of lead and ended up in the Asylum for a month."

"Not happening this time."

"Can I get that in writing?" Jack didn't look amused, despite the ribbing, "You sympathised with him."

"Empathised. There's a difference. A big, damn difference. And I'm being careful with this, alright?"

"Doesn't sound like careful to me."

“Well when I start spouting crazy shit and offing whole families, maybe then you can stop me huh? In the meantime do you want this guy caught or don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jack Crawford sighed as Will Graham looked him defiantly in the eye; the thought of Will Graham slipping into the monsters they hunted had been a constant worry from years before that Jack Crawford had hoped he’d never have to deal with again. He wished to hell it hadn’t come back to haunt him, “yeah I think we all do. Let’s keep going.”

There was something in the way time moved, like a long string stretched out, thin and friable. Every moment seemed as if it would snap under the pressure, yet it just carried on stretching, again and again until there seemed there was no capacity left for pulling it any further. And it did. And it did again. And again.

It had been a full day’s work that seemed as much as a week’s worth, coming up with some sort of plan for the ads section of the *Tattler*.

“Lecter put his first message to the Tooth Fairy in the personal ads in *National Inquirer*,” Jack had said to the team, “nice and open, but then a crazy ramble in the *Inquirer*’s nothing new. Was just lucky we caught it.”

“It was posited that Lecter was trying to catch this guy’s attention,” Will had said, sitting at the corner of the table, “but I think we can scrap that now?” he’d looked to Jack and waited for the nod, “Lecter doesn’t pander. So that means the Tooth Fairy has managed to contact him before, unnoticed. We can thank Chilton for that.”

“We’re not here to play the blame game,” Jack had butted in; Will had wished he could roll his eyes without being fired.

“The *Inquirer* was a good choice,” Zeller had spoken up before Will could get his oar in, “nice and neutral, nice and state-wide. Unfortunately that doesn’t narrow down our search area. Neither does our new target, the *Tattler*, but we’ve been in touch with the advertising department and they’ve agreed to work with us.”

Now they had something better than a stab in the dark. A way to communicate, a media they knew the Tooth Fairy would be watching like a hawk, waiting for the pearls of wisdom from the great Doctor to filter down. This was their chance. So it had to be something believable, something that Lecter would write, done just as he would perform it. With Lecter it was always a performance. Eyes had grown heavy, fingers stained with printer’s ink, hours under fluorescent lighting bit at itchy headaches.

Will missed Elle. He missed getting up in the morning to feed the strays. He hoped Ralph from work wasn’t run ragged looking after them. He hoped Jeff would still be there when he got back that night. He hoped everything would turn out ok.

Then the team had hit on it, the only thing desperate people could within a strict time limit. A message from Lecter, asking for a mail drop, a chance to catch him out in the open, this

Tooth Fairy, this monster. Will didn't like it, as such, but he'd run with it if it had a chance. *Too easy, too obvious*, his mind shouted at him. Lecter would never be that obvious. *You know that*, the voice reminded, *but then you know him better than anyone. Maybe others can still be fooled.* Instead he'd nodded to Jack and watched as the man left the room to put in the order to the print roll deadline for tomorrow's issue.

Then the phone had rung at the switchboard, then up to the department reception, and then along to the cream coloured phone sitting at Crawford's desk. Will could hear Janet as they all stood up, clearing the mess of papers and reference material and take out boxes and half finished coffees,

"Special Agent Crawford's office. I'm not sure if he's in, let me see...wait I'll be glad to find him, who's calling please?"

Then she had leaned back in her chair, tipping precariously, hand waving tightly to grab his attention, her face seriously set. Will had jogged through, a quiver of interest bouncing around his already highly strung nerves. Janet wasn't one to be easily flapped. When she clamped her hand over the receiver and said, 'He's just said - tell Graham it's the Pilgrim', Will thought he might have been momentarily elated and petrified. That's what Lecter had called him, in his message in the *Inquirer*: *Mr. Pilgrim.* Could the guy be this reckless? he thought, To phone the FBI and taunt? If he could keep him talking, then they could find him and the mail drop and the visits to Lecter and leaving home would be worth it and this could *end*.

"Get Crawford on the tap," was all he could whisper, before taking the receiver and sitting down as Janet ran from the office.

He knows your name. He wants to get you, just as much as you want to get him back. Will shut out the voice from his mind and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and held it. *Time to take the plunge, kiddo*. Will removed his hand from the receiver and spoke.

"This is Will Graham," he said calmly, yet with a hint of believable irritation, as if he'd been interrupted during something important, "can I help you?"

The low level, muffled laughter that followed sounded off. The voice was husky, definitely male, but strange. Will wondered if they were using a voice-coder, "I expect you can."

"Could I ask who's calling, please?"

"Didn't your secretary tell you?"

"No, but she's called me out of a meeting, sir, and-" he looked up as Crawford rushed silently past the door heading to the next room, followed closely by Zeller. Before Crawford flitted out of sight he lifted his hand and held up two fingers. Will got the message, *two minutes. Keep him talking for two*. He checked the clock and carried on,"and I'm really quite..."

"If you tell me you won't talk to Mr. Pilgrim, I'll hang up right now. Yes or no?"

“Mr. Pilgrim,” Will sighed, trying to draw out as much time as he could with every syllable without sounding off, *keep him on, keep him on,* “if you have some problem I’m equipped to deal with, I’ll be glad to talk with you.”

“I think you have the problem, Mr. Graham.”

The thought of it made him feel ill, even beneath the excitement and the fear. *He knows you and he wants you. He knows you and he’ll kill you*. *Kill everyone in your broken little family, like he did with the Leeds, like he did with the Jacobis.*

“I’m sorry,” he said, clearing his throat, “I don’t understand you.”

“You’ve been a busy boy, haven’t you?” the caller asked.

“Too busy to stay on the phone unless you state your business.”

“My business is in the same place as yours. Atlanta and Birmingham.”

Business in stripping homes of well worn families and children of their lives to reflect the monstrous image of a sick man. Will felt his hand tighten on the phone, even as he leaned into the voice as it spoke. Both parts terrified him, *the disgust and the growing affiliation,* even as his pulse quickened.

“Do you know something about that?”

Soft laughter, again with the hint of an oddity. Will looked up to the clock on the wall and watched as the hand slid towards the one minute mark, “Know something about it? Are you interested in Mr. Pilgrim? I’ll hang up if you lie.”

“Yes, of course I’m interested. But see, I get a lot of calls and most of them are from people who say they know things,” the second hand continued round at a snail’s pace and Will wished it faster, *one eleven, one twelve, one thirteen*, “you’d be surprised how many pretenders there are out there,” *come on Graham, you can nail this fox, keep him talking, keep him damn talking; pander to him, make him feel special, powerful.* Will knew how to do that, “talk to them for a few minutes and you can tell they don’t have the capacity to even understand what’s going on. Do you?”

“I’ll tell you what,” the voice said slickly, condescendingly, teasingly, “you tell me one thing you know about Mr. Pilgrim and maybe I’ll tell you whether you’re right or not.”

“Let’s get straight who we’re talking about here.”

“We’re talking about Mr. Pilgrim.”

“How do I know Mr. Pilgrim has done anything I’d be interested in? Has he?”

Will looked up as Janet walked carefully into the room and put a scrap of paper down on the desk. *Chicago phone booth. PD scrambling*. Will’s pulse twitched. Dear god they had him, *just keep him talking*.

“Let’s say yes,” the voice said; Will frowned.

“Are you Mr. Pilgrim?”

“I don’t think I’ll tell you that. Maybe you don’t deserve to know it.”

“Why would you say that?”

“You’re a coward,” the voice said; Will’s frown deepened, “what sort of coward abandons his soul mate at the first sign of trouble?”

“I...” Will had to swallow down the lump in his throat to ease the extra tension that had suddenly sprung up, “I’m not sure I follow you.”

“The poor doctor, all alone, left in a cage. An artist, such a beautiful artist, and you stole all his tools.”

“That’s not...” Will could see Alana rushing into the room next door, then she reappeared with a headset. He knew she was listening in.

“You’re a coward, Mr. Graham. You should admit it to yourself.”

He paused, swallowing, *you can stop this Will, you can stop all this*, “Yes, I am.”

“You are what?” he could see Alana rolling her hand, telling him to keep it up.

“A coward. I’m a coward for abandoning him,” the words stung, far deeper than they should have.

“Yes, you are. You don’t deserve what I have for you.”

Oh god don’t hang up, please don’t hang up, “What would make me deserving?”

“Hmm, you want what I have. You want it but you can never have it. I know, how about you describe exactly what you think he did to Mrs Leeds and maybe I’ll tell you if you’re right or not.”

A jolt of illness into his nerve wracked system. A reminder of how close this had all become. *I can’t,* he thought, *can’t because it’s so close sometimes I think, when I see the pictures, I can taste it and feel it and need it, the same slickness of the skin soaked in blood through my powder lined hands.*

“I don’t want to do that.”

“Goodbye.”

Will’s heart leapt but he could still hear breathing on the other end.

“*Wait*, I can’t go into that until I know...”

Then a sound on the other end, loud and abrasive; a bang as of car doors slamming. Voices and the scuffle of material. Will jumped in his chair at the sudden clang as the receiver fell and smacked against the inside of the booth. Will thought his heart might have stopped along with his held breath. *Got him, they fucking got him*. Sweet relief and utter amazement flooded him. Then a voice spoke clear and loud over the receiver,

“Freeze. Don’t even twitch. Now lock your fingers behind your head and back out of the booth slowly. Slowly. Hands on the glass and spread ‘em!”

Oh god. It’s over. Jesus fucking Christ. Then...

“I’m not armed Stan,” a woman’s voice, irritated but with a hint of worry, “my ID’s in my pocket. No, other pocket. Hey, watch where you’re putting those hands.”

Will locked eyes with Alana. She was frowning just as much as he was, though Will knew his knuckles were white around the receiver. A confused voice followed, loud on the telephone, “Who am I speaking to?”

“Will Graham,” he said quickly, “FBI.”

“This is Sergeant Stanley Riddle, Chicago PD,” said an irritated voice, “can you tell me what the hell’s going on here?”

“You have a man in custody?”

“Not exactly, though sometimes I’ll admit Freddie Lounds has more balls than most of my men. Are you preferring charges against her?”

Will felt the colour drain from his face. His hand was shaking. Alana was staring at him, rushing her hand back and forth across her neck. *Don’t stir the hornet’s nest*, she was saying, *cut it off*. Will thought he could make out a high pitched whine as a constant in his hearing; shaking his head did nothing to remove it.

You’re a coward Mr. Graham.

“Can you hear me?” the sergeant asked.

“Yes,” he managed to grind out, strangled, “yes I’m preferring charges. Obstruction of Justice. Please take her into custody and hold her for the US Attorney.”

Then suddenly Freddie did the stupidest thing she could. She got a hold of the phone.

“Will, listen...” she started fast, her normal, practical tone grating against his ears.

“Tell it to the US Attorney Lounds. Put Sergeant Riddle on the phone.”

“I know something...” she kept going as Jack walked into the room, a cordless handset in his right hand.

His face was set, furious, though he was containing it with more finesse than Will who proceeded to shout, "*Put Riddle on the goddamn telephone!*"

"I'll take it from here Will," Jack said, his voice low and no-nonsense.

"Jack..." Will warned, livid.

"Give me the call," he clicked the handset and was connected without preamble; Will listened as Jack spoke, "Lounds, you have hubbed Hell, my girl."

Again his vision seemed to dim. He thought he tasted blood but there was none in his mouth. Will wondered if he was losing sense of himself completely, as he stood, grabbed the handset and its cradle, hauled it off the desk, snapping the wire from the wall as it went, popping the holders from their sockets, *snap snap snap*, and hurled the whole thing through into the conference room where they had been working. Alana stood to the side and watched, eyes wide as it flew past her through the corridor, tumbling in the air as a graceless, tangled mess until it collided with the far wall with a splintering crack and thump. Then he stormed out, long strides, weaving around the onlookers, head down, in a blind rage.

By the time he reached the projector room he wasn't sure what he was doing there. Will took the time to close the door, lock it and turn out the few lights which were on. There were no windows, he thought, his instincts must have steered him towards the closest room with no windows. The darkness swam around him, but his pulse wouldn't abate. He felt light headed. His spine tingled and he wished he could shut out the words,

You're a coward.

"I'm not," he spat, "shut up. Just *shut up*."

Freddie Lounds, the conniving, low rent, miserable, vicious, *hack*. He wanted to kill her. It was a plain, clear feeling with little complication. *He wanted to kill her.* In those few moments he wondered briefly if he could, and whether he'd get away with it if he did. Easy to find the cheap motel room she was surely renting, *places like that had no money to waste on CCTV,* wait till she was going out to her car, *early morning or late night when the porter was asleep,* chloroform, duct tape, in the trunk, gone. He'd tie her to something heavy so she didn't float.

Coming down from the high left him feeling hollow. *How close are you going to let yourself get?* Will had no answer. He sat in the dark room and felt his pulse even out, his breathing calm and his nerves settle. Even as he continued to think by means of a mind capable of murder.

The wheels of the gurney shook beneath him and his world was a mess of voices, pain and irritation. Will Graham stared at the ceiling, his mouth clamped shut, and let the words and fluorescent lights wash over him in the bumps and crashes through swing doors.

“Let’s move, is O.R. two free?” a doctor, viewed above him and upside down as Will lay; the nurse nodded in return, “Who’s on tonight? I’ve just come on shift, no time for handover.”

“Hadrian and Lecter,” a nurse said as she jogged beside them; the name made Will tense. His side was jarred, the knife wound grinding in agony. He keened, unable to stop the reaction.

“Hadrian’s already in theatre,” the anaesthesiologist said as he walked swiftly by the bottom of the gurney; they’d been lucky to catch him as they barrelled in at the change of shift, picking him up and adding them to their train-carriage-run to the O.R.

“Then page Lecter, asap,” the doctor said as the nurse placed an oxygen mask over Will’s face, “I want him here in five. I need an epidural and ten cc’s of hyoscine ready for us bussing in. Hey, how are you with morphine?”

It took a repeat of the question for Will to realise he was the one being asked. Unclenching his jaw turned out to be a feat in and of itself. The nurse lifted the mask to let him speak.

“Makes me throw up,” he murmured as they turned a tight corner.

“Then get me some butyrophenones for after wake-up. Anything else we aughta know?”

“M’ on...s-suppressants. Antryphodene...AD blockers.”

“You’re omega?” the doctor asked. Will nodded weakly, “You’re time of the year?” Will shook his head, “Ok then double the dose of the anti-emetics, suppressants mess with the system. And mix some oxicodone into the epidural, alright Paul?” the anaesthesiologist nodded, his large eyes and droopy cheeks making him seem like an overly sad St. Bernard, “Don’t worry Agent Graham, you’re in good hands with Lecter.”

“Christ, why’d it have to be...that goddamn prick,” he finally managed, feeling faint as the blood loss continued to pump.

“What’d he say?” the doctor asked as they burst into the O.R.

“I think he’s not keen on Dr. Lecter,” the nurse looked bemused.

“Believe me, Agent, you’re lucky to have him. He’s the best butcher in town. Now let’s get you up and unconscious. Arlene, ready? One, two, three...”

Going to sleep was easier than waking up. The anaesthesia made for bad dreams, steered him towards the thoughts he would have avoided if he were conscious.

It had been a bad case. A bad one. Will didn’t like to see kids hurt, and these kids had been more than just hurt. Surviving the butchering of your entire family was bad enough, but to be the one forced to do the butchering was truly awful. In the end the woman responsible, the delusional, psychotic bitch*, had stood with the boy before her like a shield, eyes vicious as she’d ranted to him under her breath,*

*"*Shoot him, Tommy, he's not your friend. He's not your family. We're the only family you'll ever need*."*

And then the sniper had her, down and out in a fountain of blood. Will had hurried forwards and taken the gun from the boy, standing stock still and wide eyed before the whole scene. He'd opened his mouth to tell the kid everything was going to be fine.

Then the pain had registered.

He hadn't expected the kid to have a knife, he was only nine years old, he hadn't expected him to have a knife.Or to be willing to use it. 'I just wanted you to be safe' he'd said. The child's blank stare said nothing in return. It seemed the mad woman wounded and gasping on the ground had been more of a mother to him than Will had believed possible.

"...M' sorry," he awoke with the words mumbled on his lips; blinking his eyes shuttered the dream back to where it should be, a memory.

Will closed his eyes and swallowed. His mouth was dry and his throat hurt. He felt fuzzy, warm; a little light headed. Rolling his head to the right showed him the time through groggy eyes on a dull wall clock. Rolling his head to the left gave him a view of Hannibal Lecter seated next to his bed, using his bed-table for paperwork.

Will tried to gather some saliva and swallowed again. Hannibal looked up through his eyelashes as he sorted three sheets together, a rainbow of white, pink and blue.

"Nightmares?" he asked without pre-amble; the room seemed a little surreal with Lecter in it, warm and tight and hellish to deal with.

Something in him forced compliance, something he wasn't able to think too much about. Will nodded and looked away when he realised he was staring into the man's eyes. Lecter looked tired but calm; always calm*, he thought. His green surgeon's scrubs were clean but rumpled, and Will thought he could smell coffee. Lecter appeared to be continuing with his paperwork.*

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought it would have been obvious," Lecter smiled subtly; when Will didn't reply he continued, "I was just about to go home, you see, when you decided to be dreadfully inconvenient and get yourself slit open. I am making up for lost time. You've cost me a lot of paperwork."

"Wow," Will sniffed and tried to adjust himself on the bed; he didn't get very far. Somehow he'd ended up grateful, despite his misgivings – at least the man wasn't asking him about why he'd needed umpteen stitches, hours in surgery and a blood transfusion, "so much for bedside manner. Can't you just ask how I am and leave like a normal doctor?"

"Actually bedside manner wasn't top of my list. I was thinking more," Lecter pursed his lips and looked towards the bedstead, "about why you have been utterly avoiding me for the past few weeks."

"You're..." Will frowned and shook his head, irritated and bemused, "you're really bringing this up? Right now?*"*

"It is most rude of you to screen my calls."

Trapped, Will thought wryly, utterly trapped. He wondered how much damage he'd do himself if he tried to get up and drag himself to a wheelchair, make a quick escape. The grogginess made him lax. The surrealism of the situation took away his stubborn reticence. Suddenly it didn't seem worth the effort.

Will wondered how long he'd been in surgery. The suppressants would be wearing off. Will hated who he was without them.

And Hannibal Lecter, cunning beast, had taken full advantage while leaving himself a gentleman's out – he was here for Will's benefit, enough that it would be rude to utterly ignore him. Not that Will would ever ignore him, not completely. The man was different, and that was all he had figured so far because he didn't want to let it go any further than that. He was different than the run of the mill alphas that normally sniffed around him with sharp smiles and possessive eyes.

Far be it for Will to say Lecter was clearly interested in him. And far be it for Will to admit the man was, dare he say it, interesting. *And also far be it for Will to admit the idea of the dinner which had been offered two weeks ago was tempting. Lecter had been both obviously and subtly eyeing him for weeks now, at work and outwith. And, truthfully, Will had been sceptical; partly out of habit but also on recognising a powerful, arrogant, pretentiously rich alpha when he saw one. Now, however, he was beginning to wane.*

"You're not even going to ask, are you," Will goaded.

"Not unless you'd like to talk about your nightmares," Lecter replied smoothly, "I never like to pry into the inner workings of a mind not open to scrutiny."

"I'm not screening your calls."

"Ah, then there is another reason you never answer."

"It's not a good idea."

"Oh?"

"It's unprofessional. You should be familiar with that. It's kind of like you're being now."

"Actually I am going beyond the call of duty for you, Mr. Graham..."

"Will, please."

"Of course. Will. My shift ended," Lecter checked the watch in his pocket. By habit, *Will thought*, considering the clock on the wall would surely have been easier, *"six hours ago. I believe I have only had five hours of sleep in the past forty eight hours and am still suffering*

under the yoke of the FBI's need. And, of course, your cold shoulder. I merely wish you to understand that I am not your enemy, Mr. Gr...Will. I merely wish to help."

Silence. Will refused to be drawn in, even though he knew the thought was ineluctably futile.

"I heard you did not request my presence in the O.R.," again that infuriating, subtle smile.

"I don't like to owe people favours."

"It is hardly a favour, this is my job."

"Ah," Will grimaced as he shifted his back, the pain in his left side flaring like wildfire; he swallowed and stayed perfectly still, "I don't see you letting me away that easy."

"Mmm," Hannibal mused, his eyes serious, "perhaps not."

He was staring. He knew he was staring, because he was able to see Hannibal staring at him in return, and then..."God," Will laughed mutedly, unable to stop the wide smile, "did one of your many degrees teach this? Intermediate guilt tripping? Triggering the omega culpability reflex 101?"

"I prefer good, old fashioned gratitude."

"I thought this was just your job," Will replied wryly.

Hannibal laughed, with teeth. The sound sent pleasant shivers up Will's spine. A week and a half later he began the slippery slope of consulting Lecter on a professional basis. Will felt as if it were a self-fulfilling prophecy waiting to happen.

The projector hummed in the background, over the top of the silent film. Will had turned down the sound. He'd been there for a couple of hours, was sure that everyone knew him well enough to know that he needed to be left alone to get past this; those who didn't know would surely have been told. Alana would have seen to that.

The Leeds stared back at him from the projector screen, the happy little window into their life framed by black shadow. Will sat, his fingers tracing over his mouth, slumped in his chair as he watched.

Strange. He felt strange watching it, as if another had done so before him.

Did you watch them? Will knew he had, the Tooth Fairy. He'd watched them, chosen them, picked them out of a host of others.

How did you choose them? There was no answer forthcoming. Will took a deep breath and watched Mrs. Leeds enter through the front door, shaking her hair of the rain clinging to the mousy brown strands. She laughed and put her hand up, trying to shield herself from the lens. Then she'd smiled, rolled her eyes and *posed for the camera*.

It was the day after Lounds' call, and yet something had pulled him back here. Will liked to go with *the pull*. His instincts had never led him astray, even if where they led him was never pleasant. The video reached its end and the screen turned a virulent blue. Will picked up the remote and switched connectors. The Jacobis sprung to life on the screen, a parade of ghosts playing out life. He watched as the youngest boys leapt into a pool, their mother calling for them to be careful.

There was something here. Something he was missing. *What did you see in them?*

The door opened behind him. Will didn't turn. The flicker of the projector continued unhindered. He felt more than saw Starling sit down in the seat next to him.

He was just glad it wasn't Alana, but was also surprised by the absence. He remembered when they'd been able to sit comfortably together, joke, laugh. Friends. He remembered her being there for him, when he'd married, afraid that his side of the church would be barren beside Hannibal's lush garden of friends and family. He'd respected her for that, considering he knew how much she resented him for getting in the way; even though she'd never say it out loud.

"Seeing something I'm not?" Starling asked after a while.

"Not unless you're seeing pink elephants instead of home movies. Did Jack get through to Derek Thomson?"

"Mmm Hmm," she said, eyes still fixed on the screen ahead, "they're negotiating."

"God damned *Tattler*. Could it have been anything but? Hell, I'm beginning to think that after all this I should just sell up and leave the country."

"What would Eleanor think of that? Doesn't she have friends at home?"

"It was a joke."

"Didn't sound funny to me."

"Eleanor's young. She can make new friends."

"And what about you?"

"Friends have never been a necessity."

"That sounds optimistic. Anyway, wasn't exactly what I was getting at. How long have you been seeing him?"

"What?"

"It's just a question."

Will felt stiff, unwilling; Jeff wasn't an easy topic, "He's married."

“I noticed,” Starling said; when Will looked at her sharply she lifted her left hand, “saw his ring on the photograph in the *Tattler*. So, how long you been seeing him?”

It seemed like an inevitable roadblock. Will felt as if he were being forced to stare at all the ugly parts of his personality. *You’re a coward Mr. Graham*.

“About two and half years, on and off,” he said, eyes on the film, “Mostly off.”

“Ok.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“I didn’t know you wanted my verdict.”

“I don’t. He’s married. We’re not really a thing.”

“Oh? Was speaking to Marquez. She told me his wife came to collect their son a couple of days back. But he’s still here, she said. Sounds like it might be ‘a thing’ to me.”

“Thought I didn’t want your verdict.”

“Sure,” Starling said, though she looked vindicated as she sat back in her chair, “course you don’t.”

The door opening cut their conversation short. Will looked up to find Jack walking in with no compunction. He knew Jack could sense the tension, but Crawford was good at overriding other people’s crap. For once Will was glad for it. He sat down to Will’s right, leaving him sandwiched.

“Find anything?”

“Nope,” Will said, pausing the Leeds' home movie as it focused on the dog; *the dog they’d never found.*

“Ok, then let me fill you on what’s happening on the twenty fifth,” Jack didn’t need to tell Will that the twenty fifth would bring the next full moon.

“You mean when he does it again.”

“Exactly. Both times it’s been a Saturday night. Birmingham, June twenty eighth, a full moon falling on a Saturday night. It was July twenty sixth in Atlanta, that’s one day short of a full moon, but also Saturday night. This time the full moon falls on Monday, august twenty fifth. He likes the weekend, though, so we’re ready from Friday on.”

“Ready?” Will looked at him, frowning, “We’re *ready?”*

“Correct. You know how it is in the textbooks – the ideal way to investigate a homicide?”

“I never saw it done that way,” Will said, “it never turns out like that.”

“No, hardly ever,” Jack admitted, “it would be great to be able to do it though: send one guy in, a crime scene left untouched, no police feet and hands all over our evidence. Just one. Let him go over the place. He’s wired, dictating all the time. He gets the place absolutely cherry for as long as he needs. Just him...just you.”

Will drew in a long breath.

“What the hell are you playing at, Jack?”

“Starting the night of Friday twenty second we have a Grumman Gulfstream standing by at Andrews Air Force Base. I borrowed it from Interior. The basic lab stuff will be on it. We stand by – me, you, Zeller, Katz and Price, a photographer and two people for interrogations. Soon as the call comes in, we’re on our way. Anywhere in the east or south, we can be there in an hour and fifteen.”

“What about the locals?” Will asked, still frowning; he didn’t like where this was going, “They don’t have to co-operate. They won’t wait.”

“We’re blanketing the chiefs of police and the sheriff’s departments, every one of them. We’re asking orders to be posted on the dispatcher’s consoles and the duty officer’s desks.”

“No. No way. They’ll never hold off. It’s too much to ask, they couldn’t.”

“This is what we’re asking – it’s not so much. We’re asking that when a report come in the first officers at the scene go in and look. Medical personnel go in and make sure no one’s left alive. They come back out. Road-blocks, interrogations go on, everything else, but the *scene*, that’s sealed off till we get there. We drive up, you go in. You’re wired. You talk it out to us when you feel like it, don’t when you don’t. Take as long as you like – then we come in.”

“The locals won’t wait,” Starling shook her head, “and we’re not exactly trying our best for preventative measures. Waiting for the next one? What’s that going to get us?”

“It’ll get Will to the scene fresh.”

Fresh. Will tilted his head back against the chair and smiled acidly.

“Aw Jack.”

“ ‘Jack’ what?” Crawford asked gruffly.

“You kill me, you really do.”

“I don’t follow you,” he tried for innocence.

“Yes you do. What you’ve done,” Will shook his head, “couldn’t you just ask? You’ve decided to use me as bait because you don’t have anything else. So before you pop the question, you pump me up about how bad the next time will be. Not bad psychology,” he said, his smile turning wry, “to use on a fucking idiot.”

“Will, don’t take this...”

“I’m not. You *know* I’m not. Because you know I’ll do it, and Christ I will. I will do it, because we don’t have anything else, and I can’t go home as long as this guy’s loose.”

“I never doubted you would,” Jack said, though he didn’t relax; Will watched him till Crawford began looking a little tense.

“It’s something more then, isn’t it.”

Jack said nothing.

“No Ellie, *no way*,” Will said, cold.

“Jesus Will, even *I* wouldn’t ask you that.”

Will stared at him for a moment, “Oh, for Christ’s sakes Jack. You’ve decided to play ball with Freddie Lounds, haven’t you. You and little Freddie have cut a deal.”

“You know yourself it’s the best way to bait him. He’s watching the *Tattler*, waiting for Lecter’s reply. Instead of trying to fake it, let’s draw him out with what we’ve got, instead of what we haven’t.”

“It has to be Lounds?” Will asked through a tight jaw.

“She has the corner on the *Tattler.*”

“So I bad mouth the Tooth Fairy in the *Tattler* and then we give him a shot. You think it’s better than the mail drop? Don’t answer that. I know it is. Shit. Have you talked to Bloom about this?”

“I know Alana will agree with me.”

“No you don’t,” Will said, laughing bitterly, “she’ll shoot you down in flames. Which is why you’re not going to tell her.”

“You got me all figured out, huh.”

“I’ve got most people figured out. Like I had Freddie figured from the minute I saw she’d sneaked into my damn hospital room after Ellie was born and taken photos of me while I was drugged out of my damn skull. The bitch has no conscience, and if you want me to work with her I won’t be able to make it easy for you.”

“I didn’t say you had to kiss and make up.”

“She wrote me up, Jack. She wrote me up for the whole fucking nation to see. Alright? I was going through enough without that on my plate,” he knew he was beginning to rant, his voice rising, “The last thing I needed was for everyone to know I’d lost my damn mind. How’d you think I lost Ellie in the first place? Lecter’s family would never have known without her. Lounds has that on her conscience. Or she would, if she had one.”

“Sorry, I think I might be missing something,” Starling said in a blunt but blank tone; Will appreciated it. It lacked judgement.

“It’s nothing,” Will bit out, drawing in a deep breath to try and calm himself, “ask Alana, if you really need to know. I don’t think I can stomach talking about it,” he turned to Jack, “give me a minute?”

“Ok,” Jack nodded, understanding, “come back in half an hour, we’ll go over the basics.”

Will left them together, hoping Jack would fill Starling in. He couldn't even think about going over that old ground. Alana wouldn’t be happy about this when she found out. If she found out. He had to admit, he wasn’t too hot on the idea either. He wouldn’t piss on Freddie Lounds if she was on fire.

It had been a hot summer evening. He’d been twenty one, a great age to be young, free and single. And employed. The party hadn’t been what his friends would have said was swinging, too many men in frumpy suits and women in pearls. *But the Jeff hadn’t gone for the good time. The Oceanographic Institute had offered him a junior position as a researcher and this fundraiser was just a link in the chain. It’s what he’d thought at the time.* Good people, good positions, plenty of opportunity later for *good times*.

Then he’d met Susan Janis. Half high on bubbly and the adrenaline of meeting people who held his future in their hands, they’d bumped into each other on the veranda with the smokers. At the time Jeff had still craved nicotine, left over from his student days; enough to convince himself he still looked great doing it, like James Dean with his smokes crumpled in his jacket pocket.

“Need a light?” she’d asked as he patted down his pockets.

“Yeah, thanks,” he’d said, smiling, “want one?”

“I don’t smoke.”

Coming away from the party with her number had seemed like another tenuous step forwards into adult life. The next day they’d met up for dinner, then drinks, then back to his place to screw like rabbits and remind him of being young.

Then dating, she was quick minded and witty and gorgeous and she liked to play dumb and say stupid things and then back out of them and her laugh was infectious...

and meeting at work, she didn’t take anyone’s crap and she loved what she did and Jeff thought he loved her too...

and moving in together, their first apartment had been a box with windows over a bakery and they’d piled in with their furniture and the experimental marine testing equipment Jeff was working on and Susan’s company car and not a care in the world...

and promotions, they'd celebrated with cheap champagne on his boat in the bay and dreamed of a house by the ocean...

and looking through adoption papers, Anthony had tugged at his heart strings, poor little kid abandoned at six months, no one left willing to take him...

and marriage, down on the beach with their toes in the sand, his mom and dad sitting on fold out chairs, his sister and her kids watching them as they smiled and kissed and exchanged vows of forever-and-ever...

and moving to the Keys, and he and Susan fought and made up and fought and made up and Jeff grew to understand what it was to be with someone, even if it wasn't what he'd always dreamed it would be.

He had everything he should have wanted, everything he'd told himself he'd ever wanted, everything everyone else had ever wanted for him.

And now he couldn't get Will Graham out of his head.

Beautiful, tortured, blindingly intelligent, funny, sexy-as-hell, fragile, introverted, loyal, sharp, strong Will Graham had dropped into his life like a stone into a pond. The ripples had distorted the clear image of what he should want, what he did want, what everyone else wanted for him, making reality into fantasy and back again; and Jeff had allowed himself to fall.

He felt responsible. It was odd, weird almost. Saving Will's life had tied them together with messy, knotted string that Jeff couldn't untangle. He felt responsible for saving him from himself. If he'd died he wouldn't have to put up with the life you saved for him*, Jeff had always thought.* You did this, you better fucking fix it.

Only this hadn't been the fix he'd expected. Getting the man drunk and sleeping with him wasn't going to solve anything. Well...a few things, but not good things. Stupid, petty things. Will's eyes always stared right into him when they actually took the time to find his and hold the stare. Jeff hadn't ever felt something like that before; a strong connection, a need *to be with someone so strong that it overrode his own morality.*

Yet still the guilt ate at him, and bit at him and castigated him. Only he couldn't let up. His roommate in halls at College had been a real player. Nice guy but couldn't help himself, or that's the excuse he'd given and Jeff had never bought it; such a cop-out, such an easy excuse*. Had a dozen girlfriends at any one time.* I'd never be that guy*, Jeff had told himself.*

It all seemed so simple until you were that guy.

Jeff walked to Will's house from the back door, along the sand, as evening drew in. It had been easier to stay away during the day after the night before, with the memory of Will's taste in his mouth*, as the sun shone high and Jeff reminded himself that he was happily married with a kid and he sure as hell didn't need to throw that all away for the first piece of ass that showed any interest in him. Then evening had rolled around and convincing himself became the opposite,* damned unconvincing*, and he'd been forced to admit that his life wasn't*

all roses and firefly nights and he was probably just as much to blame for he and Susan drifting apart as she was.

And she was still away on research. And Will Graham still lived next door. And all he had to do was go over there and tell him it was a mistake and this couldn't go anywhere and it would be fine. Everything would be sorted.

Will was sat on his back porch when Jeff approached, Eleanor sitting up on his knee as she spoke nonsense words and waved her arms. Seeing them together should have been a moment of triumph, he'd waited so long, they'd worked so hard, just for this. *And yet now all he could think was that Will would be far better off without Jeff's problems on top of all the shit he had to deal with in his life. The last thing Will Graham needed, he was sure, was Jeff Milo falling in love with him.*

Then Will looked up at him and smiled. Reasoning and logic made a swift exit. Jeff knew he was going to have to live with it. Will's face was soft and fond. He looked happy, Jeff thought. Then he changed his mind. No, not happy. Content. Utterly content.

"Do you want to hold her?"

And the night before, all drink and lips and bright hot touches, seemed both as-nothing and as-everything. Jeff looked away towards the ocean. Looking back only made him feel like an absolute shit. Want him, his conscience goaded, don't you. Well you can't damn well have him.

"Yeah," he said, smile barely a tick at the edge of his mouth, "yeah I do."

"No, up a little. And pull your shoulder back, here," Will reached forwards and adjusted Jeff's arm, "like that. It's the isometric tension in the arms that makes the Weaver stance strong. And you need your left foot slightly forwards. Yeah, like that. Try it again."

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. The rest of the clip was emptied into the sheet until the holes shone through. A decent clustering, with a few strays. Will took the .22 calibre revolver when Jeff handed it to him, careful of the hot muzzle.

The shooting range had been empty when they'd arrived. A few more folks had come in since then. *Those who knew how to use them*. Will could tell they were off duty cops from their stance, a red haired woman with a stern face and a tall, thin black guy with his own piece. Will remembered the days he'd come to the range and not had to loan out a weapon from the range-master.

The sound of the silhouette-sheet rolling in caught his attention.

"Not bad," Jeff said through a strained, almost-smile as he looked at his results up close, "for an amateur."

“I’m pretty sure I took out a few lights and a window on my first go,” Will said, trying for levity as he put his finger through the hole in the silhouette-sheet’s sternum.

“Don’t think I’d be that steady if there was an actual human in front of me.”

“You won’t need to be.”

“Then why’d you bring me here?”

“I...” Will hesitated, drawing in a long breath, “it’s just a precaution. We should go again. If you shot someone like this with a twenty two it’d take a week to bring them down.”

“Sounds like you know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah,” Will said stiffly, “I guess I do.”

Jeff didn’t ask him to elaborate and Will appreciated it. They went again, this time on the dummies. Will thought maybe a solid, three dimensional figure might click something in Jeff. Let him see if the guts were strong enough in him. For what it was worth Jeff hesitated only a few seconds before firing. He didn’t stop till the trigger was clicking empty. Just like Will had taught him.

You don’t stop firing till he’s on the ground, ok?

They practiced drawing and shooting. Will gave Jeff his holster and had a little fun strapping him into it. He thought he deserved a little fun, at least. ‘*Can I call this sexual harassment, Agent Graham?’* Jeff had murmured through a smile as Will’s hands had skimmed his sides and chest, messing with the straps. Will had kissed the bare patch of skin on the back of his neck above his shirt and told him to shoot straight.

Drawing and firing caused a few problems with aim. Ones which Jeff had laughed off but Will hadn’t been able to see the humour in. *Mainly because the reason he’d brought him here was to make sure he could take down any of the dangerous beasts Will had drawn into his world.* He missed the first three. The fourth went into the pole the dummy was strapped to. The fifth and sixth hit the thigh and the rest dotted the sand bags behind.

“Jesus, I said shoot straight,” Will muttered when they’d gone over to investigate, “not *spray* it.”

“Doing my best,” Jeff said, amused by his own inadequacy; Will knew he didn’t look impressed because Jeff laughed a little awkwardly when he looked at him, “come on, give me a break. This is the first time I’ve even held a gun, never mind fired one.”

“It’s not that funny.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jeff frowned; there was a pause, “Why’d you bring me here, Will?”

Will ignored the question, “Let’s try the Glasers. The range-master said it’d be alright.”

The next round seemed to take the wind out of Jeff's sails. Will wasn't proud of it. The ear muffs were the first clue. They made Jeff restless, twitchy on the trigger. The gun wasn't pretty, a Bulldog .44 special. The gaping muzzle made it seem like a canon more than a gun. It had sat like a dirty secret in Will's closet, trapped in a felt lined case, for six years. *The gun he'd used to carry after Hobbs.* It was one hell of a mean pistol, but then he'd wanted it to be. Needed it to be.

It had taken him twelve bullets to down Hobbs with his standard issue .22, the psycho grinning like a Cheshire cat as his daughter lay bleeding at his feet and Will blew his rib-cage apart. After that Will had kept the Bulldog in his second holster at the waist, a round of Glaser Safety Slugs in each chamber. The rounds were overkill, Crawford had said. Will knew it, but no one had the balls to question him. Each contained no.12 shot, suspended in liquid Teflon. It was designed to fly at tremendous speed, smashing the blunt ended rounds into the target and releasing the shot like shrapnel. In meat test-dummies the results were devastating. Designed to down a man in one shot, and no more.

The first one Jeff fired tore a hole in the dummy the size of a cantaloupe. Jeff seemed to lower the weapon on instinct, taking off his safety glasses and simply staring at it. He pulled off his ear muffs and left them to dangle around his neck. Will did the same.

"Fuck," Jeff said, turning to Will, "what the hell am I taking down here? A bull?"

"Let's hope not."

"What're these for? Christ Will."

"Thought I told you not to stop till they're down."

"A hole like *that?"* Jeff looked appalled, "No one's gonna keep coming with a chunk out of them you could shove a fist into."

"Seen it happen," Will was steering dangerously close to bad territory; he could feel the tension in his fingers.

"You're kidding me."

"I don't joke about this kind of thing. Waste the whole clip, kid. The whole thing, ok?"

"Like hell. There'll be nothing *left*."

"Kinda the point."

"Will, I'm not going to blow some poor sucker apart just because..."

"Just because what, huh?" Will said angrily; Jeff stalled, gun still in hand, eyes shocked . When he didn't reply Will took him by the shoulders and spun him round, facing the dummy. He came up behind him, hands roughly taking hold of Jeff's, raising the gun. His voice was low and dark as he spoke into his ear, "Because you can't stand the thought of taking a life? What's a life worth to you? A stranger? Not a lot, I guess. What about Anthony?" he felt Jeff tense in his hold, try to lower the gun. Will held it fast, "what about that fucking maniac

going after your little boy? Tooth Fairy likes taking families in a neat package, likes putting bullets in kids' skulls. Would you shoot then? How about your wife? He's not picky. Alive, dead, he likes to touch the skin, likes to fuck them warm or cold. Would you..?"

Without the ear muffs the shots were blindingly loud. *Bang, bang, bang, bang*...they went on until Will could feel Jeff's finger still clicking the empty trigger. He couldn't hear the click for the ringing in his ears. The dummy looked like a ragged scarecrow once he was done, spilling sand like blood, hanging rags like torn skin. Will found he'd stood back on instinct.

Jeff had lowered the gun but he was still holding it, facing away. His knuckles were white around the grip. Will didn't dare touch him.

He drove them back to the house in silence. Jeff stared out of the window, curled hand to his mouth. Will didn't want to ask for forgiveness. He didn't think he deserved it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for a distinct lack of much Will and Hannibal in this chapter. The next chapter will more than make up for it!

Also I had a look into it and it seems Chicago does still have a few phone booths in operation, so I kept that in. Where I live all the phone booths have become extinct. Thank goodness for Chicago, because I absolutely love that scene from the book where Lounds tries to dupe Will. It's tense as hell and wonderfully executed and I wanted to keep it as authentic as possible.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clarice Starling liked puzzles. When she was young she'd liked mazes, or so her father used to tell her. Liked finding her way out of sticky situations, solve the unsolved; dad called her his little magpie, always looking for the shiny solution. After he'd died she liked to try and solve more than just puzzles; *life had become the tall sided maze.* As a teenager in the orphanage she kept to herself. The other omega girls didn't like her outgoing and inquisitive nature, the betas and alphas resented her *showing off* as they called it.

She liked to say it wasn't showing off. It was just simple logic. She liked mystery novels. She liked watching whodunits and guessing the culprit before the first act was over. She liked seeing chaos turn to order. She liked seeing the bad guys behind bars.

She liked imagining her dad would come back through that door with his arms open and a smile and a '*sorry little bird, I was late'*. Solving puzzles kept her hoping when she was young. As she grew older she allowed herself to understand that no matter how many puzzles she solved and people she helped, she could never bring him back. But she could still put the *bad guys behind bars.*

She liked to think he'd be proud of her. Double major in psychology and criminology, summers as a counsellor in mental health centres, but sometimes life became solving and solving and feeling like a lamed bird in a maze unable to find the exit.

And then Jack Crawford, the alpha with charisma of a sad Labrador. She'd been picked from her colleagues to attend the UVA conference, and at first she'd been amazed they'd let Crawford up to speak. The man clearly was not a natural orator. But she listened, because she wasn't rude enough to get up and leave mid seminar, and she liked what she heard. And she came back the next year. Then she started tracking down his seminars. When she applied for the FBI training program and was accepted and felt as if, suddenly, she was close to something resembling a goal. And she'd felt accomplished and driven and people started to make sense again, like she thought they might have when she was little and things were easy.

And then Lecter. Doctor Hannibal Lecter and his intense and yet utterly disregarding stares, his devastating intelligence, his host of victims still to be found, his terrible mind and his ability to be entirely and completely normal despite his situation. And she'd felt intrigued by the puzzle of it. The *why* and the *what for* and the *how*. And Crawford had liked that they'd built a rapport, to an extent, and Starling had liked that Crawford had liked it. And of course she'd heard, because everyone had heard, of Lecter's infamous capture and his trial and the slew of psychologists that had taken a crack at him and come away bemused and slightly ill. Yet things seemed to have rocketed off without her and her training was over and, now it was all for real.

And then Will Graham.

When it came to people, she tended to treat them the same way she treated puzzles; as something with a solution. Her southern upbringing had pummelled politeness into her system until she found it difficult to be little else to strangers. Her omega make-up further consolidated her personality into an unassuming, smiling nice-girl. She didn't mind if that's how she was taken at first glance, it was useful for people to apply their own stereotypes; allowed her to study them without suspicion and slip under their radar.

But with Will Graham she'd found her usual techniques fell by the wayside. It had been difficult not to judge him before they'd met. He was something of a legend, famous or infamous depending on who you talked to. Sometimes she thought she talked to him as if she'd known him for years rather than days; an old, estranged friend. Other times she spoke to him with strained patience. Other times she wished he'd let her help him, because he damn well looked like he needed it. She liked to think their like-physiology had a little to do with that. Although she was less averse to admitting it than Graham appeared to be.

He hadn't been what she'd expected. Of course all of Quantico knew of Graham. Crawford's golden boy, the man who brought down the Minnesota Shrike, the Angel Maker, who saw where others feared to look, nearly driven mad by the job. The one who'd got away, only to get got. The man who'd had his life ripped down the middle, torn open and left to die. And it showed, day by day, oh it showed. Will looked like the stitches were coming apart and the slow bleed had become a haemorrhage. Truthfully she was beginning to wonder how long he had until he bled out.

Her love of puzzles gelled with his inscrutability. Will Graham was a puzzle, in a similar and yet intrinsically different fashion to Hannibal Lecter. Graham forced himself to be an enigma as a defence; Lecter was so by nature. As such Clarice felt she was more likely to get through to Graham, even though she felt that Lecter would be a better adviser. Yet, bizarrely, she felt Graham may be more dangerous to deal with.

The traumatised were always unpredictable, because they knew they could survive. She felt she understood that better than most. Nothing was to be lost, all was to be gained. As she stood in the doorway to the small kitchen in the Washington safe house and looked in at the scene there, she knew her assessment was correct.

Will Graham sat in the corner, on the floor, his daughter Eleanor between his outstretched legs as she poured water from a milk jug into an empty mug.

"D'you want milk Charlotte?" Eleanor asked in an affected, stilted voice, "There you are."

Graham's eyes were a thousand miles away, even as he stared down at her, but she could see the hollowness there. His hands rested against her sides as the little girl played *tea party* with an imaginary friend, pressed not too tightly, but tightly enough that the wounds showed. For a strange moment she felt as if she were interrupting something private.

"Need me for something?" he asked; Clarice took a moment to answer, considering Graham hadn't taken his eyes from Eleanor.

"Jack sent me to remind you Lounds is due in at four," she said calmly.

“Going to escort me to the premises?”

“Do I need to?”

“Maybe,” he didn’t smile, instead frowning as Eleanor spilt the water when she stirred haphazardly with a teaspoon, “hey, Ellie, careful with that.”

“Sorry,” Eleanor said absently, as if by rote.

“Do you want me to give you a ride in?” Clarice asked; Graham looked ready to stay put and make good on his threat.

“...Yeah,” he nodded eventually, giving his daughter a quick squeeze, “ok honey, I’ve got to go.”

“No,” Eleanor whined as she turned, straining to reach for her father as he stood, “no, I don’t wan’ you to.”

“I have to, I won’t be long, I promise.”

“*No*,” Elle bit out in a caustic almost-sob, her face crumpling as she stood up on wobbly legs, trotting after him, “daddy, wa-it.”

“Elle, be a good girl for me, ok?” Graham looked like he was about to snap or breakdown, one of the two, “Please, I have to go to work. I’ll come back and tuck you in...”

The crying started, long and low wails and tears down rosy cheeks and Graham stopped, stock still. Starling wished she could simply leave without seeming completely heartless. When Eleanor wrapped her arms around his leg Graham rubbed roughly at his face, leaving his hand over his mouth and his eyes closed.

“Could you give me a minute?” he asked as he dropped his hand, his eyes never going further than her shoulder.

“Sure.”

Graham had lifted the distraught child into his arms and taken her upstairs. Clarice wondered, as she waited downstairs, whether he knew she could hear them talking on the landing above. The words were muffled but recognisable, even beneath Eleanor’s constant weeping. Jeffrey Milo sounded taught and fractious, like a man who’d spent the last so many weeks watching everyone around him do exactly the opposite of what they should. Will, by contrast, sounded exhausted, resigned. She contemplated stepping outside, but decided it would perhaps be better to keep tabs on Graham as much as possible.

“You can’t,” Milo was saying, “this is crazy. Can’t you see you’re upsetting her?”

“I know. I know, alright? She’s tired, that’s all. She needs some sleep and she’ll be fine.”

“No, Will, it’s not fine. It’s not going to be fine,” the sound of a door opening, “This is...I swear, Will, this Crawford is setting you up for...”

“No one’s setting me up,” Will replied, “I said I’d do it.”

“Daddy, I wanna go wif you.”

“Elle please, not now. Jeff, It’ll work out.”

“Are you fucking mad?” Clarice thought the question was legitimate, despite being entirely irrelevant.

“Not in front of Elle,” Will sounded harsh.

“Don’t use her as an excuse, you hypocrite. Crawford wants to...god. So *he* gets you in the papers and *you* get to be the one with the target painted on your back? What if..?”

“We can’t work in what-ifs. We don’t have the time to work in what-ifs.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, huh?”

“*Daddy*...”

“Elle, for god’s sakes, *not now*,” Will sounded like he’d already snapped, shifting back to Milo, “I can’t tell you, it’s an ongoing case.”

“Oh bullshit.”

“Jeff, for god’s sakes.”

“*Bullshit.* You know what? Sometimes I think you want to be fucking miserable, you know that? You love being so low that no one can pull you back out. And now you want everyone else to be just like you. Just as *miserable* as you.”

A pause, then, “I’ve got to go.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Milo grated out, “You fucking do that.”

Clarice thought it a disservice to pretend she hadn’t heard everything. She waited by the door and didn’t flinch when Graham walked down the stairs and straight past her, out into the overcast morning.

They drove in silence; though sometimes she caught him from the corner of her eye, staring out the window as if to look for something he wished were there but knew could never be.

It was cold and it was raining and it was far too late at night to still be on the clock.

Of course it was always too late at night to still be working, but Will never switched off during a case. Especially not a case like this one. Olmstead was a special display from a special artist. *He liked to think that his colleagues were the same, that they would have the*

capacity to see past the sheer horror of the chisel stabbed through his sternum, or be able to marvel at the brutality of the cap-bar run through his thigh at a just-so angle. Yet he had a funny feeling they didn't, that they went home to their families and fed their pets and talked to their kids and tried their best to separate terror from reality.

And he was left staring in at the warm glow window from the cold outside. Will didn't mind, not too much. He liked the cold.

Yet that very thought made this visit all the more an uneasy compromise. He was used to working mainly under his own initiative, but now he felt as if he'd been forced to accept the interloper on his territory. Dr. Lecter's practical affability made him an easy target for Will's frustration. The man was personable, to an extent, though Will found it difficult to see past the pitfalls in his personality. The parts Will knew would turn his stomach more than most; he was clearly an elitist with a superiority complex and an indefinable air of haughty danger that Will couldn't pin down. All he knew was the man put the hairs on the back of his neck on end, and so far Will wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

The indefinable, the enigma, the strange tug at his gut that Lecter stirred in him was a barb beneath the skin. His impeccable manners juxtaposed to his wonderfully dark sense of humour. His seeming love of social gatherings and yet his inexplicable disinterest in most of the people he encountered. The only thing standing in the way of digging deeper, understanding Lecter's motivations, was the one thing he needed above all else.

Which had led to this ludicrous situation. Will could feel the nervous itch at the back of his neck; withdrawal from the suppressants had left him twitchy, irritated and paranoid. He needed to believe it would be worth it, because he was not only without his barrier, but truly vulnerable in this state. Sensitive and fractious. He just hoped it would allow him to find the last piece of the puzzle, if there was one to find.

What he had *found was that Lecter had treated Olmstead. It was old and it was obscure but his own recent trip to the hospital had inspired him. He'd requested Olmstead's archived medical records. Finding a minor surgery for a workshop related injury was the first step. The next was to track down the surgeon who'd operated on Olmstead. When he'd contacted the name on the form she'd had no memory of it. Considering she was an ER surgeon Will hadn't been surprised, until she'd looked up the records. Then Lecter's name had slunk from the corner, the surgeon explaining that Lecter had covered her shift but the records hadn't been changed. Will had felt as if he were being followed by the man's shadow.*

And now he was here. Will hitched up his jacket over his head as he hurried from his car up the wide, stone steps to the front door. The lights were on in the lower rooms. Will hoped he wasn't overstepping the boundaries as he rang the doorbell. So far he'd only ever visited Lecter's downtown office with its ostentatious library. Turning up at the man's home was a different story.

Dr. Lecter answered the door in a plain white shirt and dark trousers, seeming incongruous next to his usual caustically patterned, double breasted suits, or his green surgeon's scrubs, "Mr Graham," he said, eyes alight with subtle victory that Will knew he shouldn't appreciate, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

“I...” for a moment Will blanked, that gaze lingered on him, tight and warm. *Something was different, something was wrong, “I thought I told you not to call me that. It's Will or nothing."*

"Will, of course," Hannibal smiled, "forgive me."

"No, it's fine I..." what are you doing Graham, he asked himself, dear god what are you doing? "actually had something I wanted to ask you. About the case. Just something I thought you could clear up for me.”

“Of course, come in,” Lecter stood back and held the door, “I shall fetch you a towel.”

“Really, I’m fine,” Will said, smiling in a twitchy manner as he entered; he stiffened as Lecter stepped behind him and took his coat, “I, uh, thanks.”

His shoes were leaving wet prints on the immaculate wooden floor. He felt instantly out of place, both physically and mentally. The house was lit to a level appropriate for an evening dinner. It felt candlelit, despite the electric lights, enough that shadows seemed to flicker. There was a smell of coriander and fresh lemon on the air. It reminded Will of home, long ago with his father preparing the bass they’d caught in the river, fresh herbs and lemon and the tang of salt.

And, beneath it all, the inescapable scent of cold-spice musk on hot skin. *Lecter’s scent had only ever been a tickle at the back of his throat before, like a mouthful of choked upon smoke leaving a bitter aftertaste. Now it felt drawn down into the lungs, seeping out into his system.* The baseless beauty of that one hot hit straight from the brain to the crotch. *For an awkward moment Will felt as if he were sixteen again. It turned out it wasn’t a feeling that could be blinked away, no matter how hard he tried.*

“It was just about...” he stalled, swallowing; get out, get out, get out, *half of him screamed, while the other half pleaded,* stay, stay, fucking stay where you are, *“I mean I found something, about Olmstead. Thought you might remember treating him?”*

“Treating him as a patient?” Lecter took a deep breath and looked down to his left, “no,” he returned his gaze to Will, “I am afraid not. Was this through an admission to the ER?”

“Yes. Two years ago.”

“I see. Time is a slippery one. I have lost that moment to it. But...” he paused, a soft frown upon his brow, “I hope you do not mind me saying, but you look unwell.”

“I’m fine,” Will tried to smile but it slid to a grimace, “that was all I really wanted to...know. Look, I’d better get going.”

“Nonsense, you have arrived at a fortuitous time. Dinner would surely be bereft without you, I know that I will be,” the fiery mess in his stomach flared as Lecter caught and held his eyes, “Eating alone is such a waste. I will set you a place.”

“Can’t,” Will said the word so quickly that it seemed fired from a gun; Lecter watched him oddly. The smell was cloying, stronger, beat upon beat against his resistance, “I mean I, uh,

really need to get home and...so...”

His mind felt mushy, unwilling. He couldn’t think straight. It had been so long since he’d started taking the Antryphodene, days and months and years of being sand-banked from the unpredictable floodwaters of mindless desire. *And now he’d stopped the waters were gushing over.*

“I insist. Perhaps a full stomach may jog my memory.”

Maroon. Will had never noticed quite what a severe shade of maroon Lecter’s eyes were. They seemed to glow in the low light. He thought he might be sweating, beading at the top of his spine.

“God, will you just go check on the food already?”

It took a few seconds for Will to realise his mouth had moved with the thought. Speaking to people on a daily basis was one of Will’s greatest contentions. Now, he felt as if he had three left feet, and one of them was a permanent fixture in his throat. He wanted to apologise, say he was sorry and leave, but instead he stood, dear in the headlights, and watched. Lecter did not react.

“If you would like to wait a moment,” he said neutrally, making Will feel like a jabbering mess next to his immaculate calm, “I must check on dinner.”

“Sure,” Will said awkwardly, shifting on his feet, hands on his hips, “I’ll just...here?” he cleared his throat when Lecter inclined his head, “Right.”

Christ, he thought as Lecter left, get a hold of yourself. Will felt exposed in the hallway, too near to the door not to just turn and leave. To his right, before the stairs, a door sat ajar. Will chose it arbitrarily and walked in without compunction. Inside he found a tall room, dark in its excessive mahogany and with its long bookshelves filled with leather bound volumes. Keep focus, he thought, keep focus. You’re here for work, he thought as he walked towards a desk in the middle of the room. Upon it rested a halogen lamp which gave the room its light. The sparse illumination made the room seem cave-like, as if the ceiling were an indefinable distance away. Will felt small and resented it.

Reaching out he ran his palms over the cool, smooth varnish of the desktop. The space was a study in OCD. Will focused on it, trying to find a derisive humour in the perfect angle of books to corners of tables, of pens lined up with paper, of the lamp at a perfect forty five degrees to the ink well. Before the ornately carved chair Will found a leather folder, flipped closed. At its closest end he could see an incongruous, cream corner poking free. It blared like a lamplight on a midnight moorland. In this pristine room, the corner of paper was a butterfly of chaos.

It was impossible not to reach out and lift the folder open. Or it would have been, if a hand had not clamped down upon his shoulder, causing him to start backwards, colliding with a solid chest, hips bumping hips and Will gasped and the feeling was that of falling from a height as he turned, hands reaching backwards to grab at the desk as Hannibal Lecter steadied him, fingers against Will’s sides, barely a foot between them.

‘Forgive me for startling you’

He was sure they would have been Lecter’s next words, if Will hadn’t taken the glaring opportunity to lean forwards and kiss his lips closed.

He wished his rabid sense of want and need were utterly to blame as he opened his mouth and accepted the intensity. He wished it weren’t all a thin veneer, beneath which his true feelings had been expertly hidden. He wished he could admit how much he wanted this, instead of believing it all a lie of his biology. They pressed together. Will was sure that sound of wanton need he could hear had come from his own throat. They consumed each other as a fire devours wood and turns coal to ash. When they broke apart, Will found himself staring into those maroon eyes, now red pinpricks in the low light. Hannibal caressed his cheek with a reverent hand.

“The plain sense of it,” he murmured, “without reflection it becomes a mirror.”

“What did you say?” Will asked, realising his breathing was ragged.

“I think you have helped me solve something complex,” Lecter said, “with something utterly simple,” the hand at his face slipped to his neck and Will found himself tipping to expose the flesh, “may I?”

“If you have to ask...” Will had murmured, watching through eyes almost closed.

Crowded against the desk, all hands and scent and instinct overwhelming his clawing need to run, Will Graham felt himself blindly concede defeat without any way to stop it.

Dr. Alana Bloom found it difficult to scheme towards hurt. Without taking her studies to that of medicine of the body, she still felt that the Hippocratic oath applied to the medicine of the mind. The last great frontier was inside; she had seen enough of the human psyche to know that there was no end to its desires, its wants, its needs and its capacity for depravity. The id could concoct far worse devilry than any physical torture; the cure was an enigma, if it even existed. Treating the sick was a gift, not a tool. The thought of using her training to cause mental distress rather than healing it was unconscionable.

And yet, this time it was to do good. That was how it was being sold to her, like a door to door salesman hawking useless wares. *Profiling the Tooth Fairy and finding all the little weak spots where pressure and time had worn thin the fragile membrane.* Bad things for bad people. It didn’t sit right. And she knew why.

“I need your help with this,” Crawford stated it like man hanging at the end of a rope.

“I’m not sure you know what you’re asking.”

“Advice – that’s what I’m asking.”

“You want to, what?” Alana asked, “Push this guy towards some sort of self-destructive behaviour? He’s shown no signs of it so far. He’s determined, he’s careful, he’s driven. I doubt suicide is on his agenda. Regardless, if that’s what you wanted I wouldn’t help you.”

“I know.”

“And just for your information, *I know*.”

Jack looked as if he might protest. He folded quickly under Alana’s steady stare, “Christ. That’s just great. Graham’s been talking to you?”

“The delightful Agent Starling thought it best I be informed,” Alana said with a wry smile, her eyes hard, “I have a feeling she’ll go far. If you don’t hold her back,” she shook her head and folder her arms, “I swear to god, Jack. You just don’t get it, do you? Will’s fooled you again.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating,” Jack said tightly.

“He’s fooled you into thinking he’s strong enough, that he’s capable, that he can weather through, that this time will be *different*. That this time he won’t be left a mute wreck with eyes unable to see the good in the world. Do you know what Will’s main drive is, Jack?”

“He wants to catch this guy, just like we all do.”

“Wrong,” Alana said, sitting back in her chair, “it’s fear, Jack. Will deals with a huge amount of fear, every day.”

Jack looked as if he were about to scoff but held back on it, “Because of Lecter?”

“Partly. You can’t have any understanding of what that did to him. Even I don’t know the full extent of the damage. I don’t think I’d even dare to. But I can tell one thing for sure. He’s alone, Jack. Utterly alone. That’s how he sees himself. There’s no one else there in his world except him and his little girl, and he’s there for her, not the other way around. You’re putting all the strain on him and he’s got no one propping him up.”

“Like hell, he’s got that guy he brought from the Keys, his neighbour,” Jack said, waving Alana’s concerns away, “I’m not judging and I don’t really give a shit how married he is, Will’s not alone.”

“It must be nice, living in a world where things are so *easy* to understand.”

“Hey, I don’t need your sarcasm. You’re trying to tell me he’s afraid? We’re all afraid. Hell, I feel like I should be the one walking outside in a Kevlar vest most of my days.”

“It’s not just...” Alana bit down on the frustration leaking into her tone; she took a deep breath, closed her eyes in a long blink and tried to think of a simple and logical plan of attack. Will had made it clear on several occasions that he didn’t want help. Especially not psychological. The last thing he wanted was someone poking around his damaged goods. He’d been sensitive enough about it before he’d met Hannibal. *Now*...well the damage in that

department was, in her eyes, irrevocable. As far as she was concerned they were lucky Will was able to trust them at all.

Hell, she thought, *I avoided being in a room alone with him for months after we first met because I knew he'd pick up on me analysing him. Knew he'd bring the shutters down. He's sharp, too sharp for his own good sometimes. It took a year to get past that. To let him learn to trust that I was there for him, not for my prowess in the journals.* Alana didn't know how to explain that to Jack. The man was practical and arrogant and, despite being a first rate behavioural analyst, he didn't seem to be able to resist using the tools at his disposal if he thought it would get results. Alana didn't want Will to turn into a pawn.

"It is not conventional fear," she started basic, "Will's disorder is centred in empathy, it plays on the most vulnerable parts of his personality, and his echopraxia doesn't help. Neither does his eidetic memory. He sees inside the minds of these killers and, if we don't watch out, he might not find his way back out again. You know how bad it got before. We nearly lost him to Hobbs. You know, sometimes I think it was blind luck we managed to lead him back up out of that particular rabbit hole.

"Imagination is a large part of fear, and Will has enough imagination for all of us. And he's already lived through the worst situations he could imagine, through his job, surviving Lecter, with his children. I don't think anything is too far-fetched for him now. The worst-case-scenario will have become his world. It's all he'll be able to see. And *now*," Alana leaned forwards, "you're asking him to be the bait. Worst of all you knew he'd say yes because, deep down, he needs to *save everyone*. You're using him, Jack."

Crawford didn't have a comeback.

"You're going to wind up this maniac and let him go, even though you know he's fixed his sights on Will. You're going to get burned, Jack, and the worst part is it's not you who'll take the fall. For god's sakes he has a child. What's going to happen to her if, *god forbid*, anything goes wrong?"

"Lots of people are dead, doctor," Jack said, "We just want to make sure the Tooth Fairy doesn't get his feet sticky on the twenty fifth."

"Then *you* set yourself up as the target," Alana said coldly, standing when she realised she stood no chance of changing his mind, "maybe then I'll believe your conviction. Till then, don't bother asking for my opinion since you seem adamant to ignore it."

As she reached the door, pulling it open, she couldn't stop herself from turning back.

"If anything happens to him, Jack, I swear to god," Alana held his stare, "I wouldn't want to be you. I really wouldn't."

In the background, a clock chimed two. Hannibal Lecter, sitting cross legged in a wing-backed armchair before a cold fireplace in the west-wing's first sitting room, put down his

copy of Cicero's *In Verrem* and stood to his full height. The room did not change about him, *high, vaulted ceiling with cherubs clustered in the cornicing, holding small flutes and staring down as if to whisper secrets;* he knew his way to the door.

A thousand rooms, miles of corridors, hundreds of facts attached to each object furnishing each room, a pleasant respite awaiting him whenever he chose to retire there. Hannibal Lecter's palace was vast, even by medieval standards. Translated to the tangible world it would rival the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul for size and complexity.

He passed from the western wing into the Great Hall of the Seasons. The palace was built according to the rules discovered by Simonides of Ceos; it was airy, high-ceilinged, furnished with objects and tableaux that were vivid, striking, sometimes shocking and absurd, and often beautiful. The displays were well spaced and well lit, like those of a great museum. But the walls were not the neutral colours of museum walls. Like Giotto, Lecter had frescoed the walls of his mind.

Outside, on the open balcony, the sunlight was streaming in. The ceiling was lofty and run through with pristine archways. The pillars along the balcony cast shadows upon him as he walked. His collections flitted past him in a myriad of happy accidents. *The sunlight reminded him of Verona, Eighty Three.* Up popped the stilted bronze of the Castelvecchio Museum's prized *Juliet*. He could have her speak Meleager if he wished, but today he chose only to look. In her arms she carried a small bundle of cloth, like an infant's wrap.

And then, on the air like a harp's melody, could be caught the laughter of children. Peering down over the balcony's edge allowed a large courtyard to build itself accordingly.

You shouldn't, he thought. It does no good. Futility, he thought, was the enemy of peace. Yet the draw was magnetic. He found it impossible to resist once the thought took him.

Descending to the grass was as simple as taking the stairwell behind him, along which were a series of paintings: St. Francis feeding a moth to a starling *leading to* Caravaggio's decapitated Medusa with her mouth open in a fearful cry *leading to* Achilles and Patroclus embraced in death *leading to* the door he should not open. When he reached the closed door at the bottom step, Hannibal Lecter wished to imagine he could feel the warmth of sunlight upon his bare arms as he stepped out. There was a perfumed scent of gardenias on the air. Insects buzzed.

He could remember their many trips to Patterson Park. Will would sneeze at the pollen. They would take the red, cross-stitched picnic blanket Will had bought at a thrift store. Laying on his back and seeing the sky above. Of course there were parts he was forced to improvise, *two small girls, no more than three, one with her hair in curls, the other with her long, straight locks in braids, cheeks rosy, bedecked in matching yellow dresses.* They tumbled about the lawn as he had seen children do, chasing each other, squealing, laughing.

Hannibal stepped out and took his place upon the blanket. The play began.

"Where have you been?" he looked up as Will approached, *the dark blue shirt he'd bought for him while they courted, over the faded jeans he insisted on wearing, his feet bare,* "I was looking all over for you."

“Did you find the bread?”

“Mm,” Will nodded, sitting down beside him, *the brush of a warm body next to his, the familiar scent,* “I left it in the back seat. Though I don’t think they like us feeding the swans. Might need to do it on the sly.”

“I’m sure we will find a way,” Hannibal said, looking over to the girls, “Charlotte, play nicely with your sister.”

The girls continued to tumble and run and smile, with no heed for him. He turned at a touch against his arm. Will was lying back against the soft, red cotton. Hannibal joined him. They lay side by side, staring up at the sky. *The pull, a need to care for the man next to him, to let him want and need for nothing, to keep him close for as long as he could stand it.* His memories dug deeper.

“Do you think they’ll be more like me, or more like you? Our child?” *Will had asked it not long after they’d fist tried for a child and failed; he had been melancholy in those months.*

“I hope for the best of both. Would you not?”

“I don’t know,” Hannibal imagined staring at him; Will’s profile was Grecian, curling hair over his chiselled features, his curved lips, face unlined and free of cares. *Sometimes Hannibal had wondered how the beautiful creature had managed to fool the world and, to an extent, fool Hannibal himself,* “sometimes I hope they won’t be anything like me at all.”

“I would hate to imagine why. Would it be fair of me to say I love you for your mind?”

“Flatterer,” Will smiled; *beautiful, so very beautiful.*

“Though I cannot complain about the body it is attached to.”

“For crying out loud,” he was laughing now, sweet and low, eyes crinkled attractively. Their fingers tangled.

“I have been waiting for you,” *he remembered saying it, not long after he had proposed, in his aunt’s garden as Will sat and sipped water with ice, stiff and unhappy despite his repose in a lawn chair,* “though I fear the need you break in me. I have been waiting for you.”

The memory was too close, too thickly linked with a few days prior. He should not have pushed so far. When Will turned to look at him his grey eyes were hard, unforgiving. His face was set, older, worried and drawn. He wore a dark grey suit jacket over a light blue shirt. Hannibal could smell the *ship on the bottle.* The sound of children had fallen absent.

“You haven’t been waiting for this moment,” Will said through a strained smile that left his eyes cold, “you god damned liar.”

The familiar view above him flipped from one to another. The roof of his cell could not rival the pale blue of a summer’s day, scraped with thin clouds like pulled cotton wool, populated by swift birds and bumbling butterflies. He wished to close his eyes once more and drift; yet there was a voice speaking to him.

“Lecter?” it was Chilton, he could hear the strain in the man’s voice as he spoke from beyond the bars, as if he’d been trying to catch his attention for many minutes, “When you’re quite ready.”

It really was too simple to play with Chilton. Sometimes it amused him. Most of the time he felt like a cat toying with a terrified fly, lifting his paw only to mercilessly bat down again and again at its tattered wings. He relented, lifting his right arm and rolling his hand. He could imagine Chilton’s tight lips and fuming anger at the airy gesture; he did not deign to look.

“I need you on your feet,” Chilton said; when Lecter eventually pushed up onto his elbows and looked over his shoulder he was greeted by the cleaning crew. The orderlies stood in a neat row, boxes in their hands. Lecter was surprised it had taken so long for the entourage to arrive.

He did not speak. He would not grovel to the likes of a low rent psychologist and his cronies. He went through the steps, one by one; hands through the bars, cuffs on, collar tight, watching as they tore down his drawings, boxed up his books, took the clay in its thick wrapping, the finished figurine he’d moulded carelessly shoved in with the rest.

“I had hoped we wouldn’t need to go through this again,” Chilton stood in the middle of the room and surveyed the destruction happening around him, “but you just keep disappointing me.”

"Is this *your* decision?"

"I decide your punitive measures here," Chilton said abrasively.

"Of course," Hannibal said, "this is not the sort of thing Will Graham would request. Of course it is always a pleasure to know you equate your dear nurse’s disfigurement with a harmless phone call, Frederick. You could think of nothing more inventive than taking my books?”

“Well, they frown on sleep deprivation and hard labour these days,” Chilton smiled, though Hannibal could tell it was only partly sincere, “so I’ll have to settle for your own personal little escapes.”

“I see dear Will did not take you up on your offer,” he enjoyed seeing Chilton stiffen, unable to hide the reaction.

“Yes, he did not. You must understand how I feel.”

“How crass. Your analogies need work.”

“Are we done, Greg?” Chilton asked the stocky Texan orderly, carrying the heavy box of books in his hands with ease.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” Chilton said to Hannibal as a parting shot.

Lecter smiled at the now bare wall as he heard the door close and lock, felt the collar loosen and disappear, the cuffs undone. Chilton would never know how potent and utterly liberating his thoughts could be.

He closed his eyes.

The church was lofty and cold. Winter was no time to be among the pews. Yet he had chosen it for its thematic significance, rather than its creature comforts. The body sat where he had put it, in the third set, three rows up, three spaces in; a perfect trinity. Gordon Humber, owner of the awful, tactless and utterly odious new bookstore which had bought out and replaced the wonderful independent shop which had sat in its place for years. Not only had the little old Polish woman who owned it always found him the most obscure titles at no extra charge, she had made an espresso the Italians would envy.

Humber had been most rude when Hannibal had asked whether he would mind helping him track down a copy of a 1629 King James Bible; there had been a particularly ironic amendment by the scribe to Corintheans 11 which he wished to own.

Standing over the man, Lecter lifted the bible from the shelf before him, his lips lifting fondly as he opened the beautifully gilt leather bindings to find the dear red tongue holding open the verse.

"*No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light*."

Beneath the high, beautifully painted dome of the church and in the diminutive, white, barren cell in the Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane, Hannibal Lecter laughed through curled lips at the inadequacy of the human language to capture the essence of the divine.

When it came to it, Will knew he'd surprised Bloom and Crawford both. He appeared willing to meet Lounds half-way, his expression affable beneath his cold, grey eyes. The interview went without a hitch, mainly, Will thought, because of his continued insistence that it take place at J.E.H. and not downtown.

Even Freddie seemed willing to behave herself. Will knew she could probably sense his camouflaged animosity for twenty paces, but she did a good job of plastering a smile over it and moving on. He had balked only twice. The first had been when Freddie had switched from asking him what she should put down about the faked artist's depiction of the Tooth Fairy, to asking for intimate details of the Leeds murder, focussing disturbingly on Mrs Leeds.

They'd taken a break when Jack had picked up on Will's icy calm.

"Holding it together?"

"How much longer is this going to take?" Will had asked as he drank a lukewarm coffee.

“Just some more photos. We were thinking of Wellington Street, there’s an empty flat there. Make it look like you’ve rented it out. A hideaway. It’ll give him something to focus on.”

“Sure,” Will had said, “ok. Let’s get back to it.”

The second had almost made Jack start forwards to break up a fight that didn’t happen. As soon as Eleanor’s name had traipsed from Lounds’ mouth Crawford had been on his feet, hovering nearby. Will sat across from her, elbows on his knees, and smiled.

“You got everything in that bag, Lounds?” he’d asked, nodding to her bulging mailbag, “All your tricks from today?”

She watched him carefully, a slight frown in place even as her eyes were challenging.

“Because if you mention her name again I’m going to take it and its contents to the parking lot and set the whole affair on fire. Next question.”

“Gees, Graham,” she’d said, rolling her eyes, “you’re so overdramatic.”

The article was done and dusted by nine o’clock. They’d driven home every trick in the book. Will hoped it was enough and that the Tooth Fairy would be mad enough to buy it. He’d made statements no investigator would ever make and no straight newspaper would ever credit. He’d speculated that the Tooth Fairy was ugly, impotent with persons of the opposite sex, falsely claimed that he sexually molested his male victims. That he was doubtless the laughing stock of his acquaintances and the product of an incestuous home.

The key shot had been the last thing they’d done, taken in his ‘Washington hideaway’, the apartment Crawford had rented out and Lounds had called ‘the place he’d borrowed until he squashed the fairy’. The photograph had showed him in a bath-robe at a desk, studying late into the night, pouring over a grotesque artist’s interpretation of the Fairy. Behind him a slice of the Capitol dome could be seen through the window. In the lower left hand corner a blurred but readable sign of a popular motel across the street.

The Tooth Fairy could find the apartment if he wanted to. And Graham wanted him to. Was surprised at the visceral need for him to. *Part of him wondered if the Fairy was thinking about him while he thought about the Fairy.* He’d shaken his head and scratched at his neck. It was starting to get worse, the synchronisation, the symbiosis. He didn’t want it to go any further.

Will felt the relief of going back to his hotel room akin to a prisoner fleeing a torture chamber. Returning to the safe house would have made his life infinitely better, but he and Jack had both agreed that the smaller the risk factor in this operation the better. He wouldn’t put Eleanor and Jeff in harms way, he couldn’t even consider it. *Yet you’ll do it to yourself?* his conscience jibed. Will wanted to ignore the stab, yet it sounded too much like Milo to disregard. He didn’t want to think about the things that didn’t work.

But the minibar worked, much to his detriment. And his phone still got signal, even though he was sure he’d be better cut off from the world for a while. And he opened the first miniature and downed it without much thought for why he shouldn’t. And he’d called the

number before he thought about why he was doing it, or why it would be a bad idea. Or who he wished he could hear just to have the voice soothe his aching, heavy nerves.

“Hey,” he said as he lay back on the bed, phone held in the crook of his ear as he undid a second bottle of bourbon; the Jack Daniels was already gone, and the Jim Beam was in his hands.

“Hey,” Jeff sighed in reply, “all done?”

“And dusted.”

“Really think this is gonna work?”

“We’re keeping an eye on it. Just need to wait and see.”

“Yeah, I guess. Look, about earlier I...”

“No, I’m sorry,” Will jumped in, the alcohol making him quick to leap on the apology.

“...I wasn’t going to apologise.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Earlier on, I meant what I said.”

“Right,” Will said quietly, “uh huh.”

“She cried for an hour, Will. She was asking for you until she went to sleep, fucking exhausted from crying her damn eyes out. And I’m here, trying to make her feel better when *my* kid is miles away, *my kid* Will. You think this is easy for me? Do you? Can you even see further than the edge of this case you’re on? Huh?”

“Please, don’t do this, not now,” Will sighed.

“You’re hurting her,” Jeff did not mince his words and Will flinched, “is that what you want?”

“Of course it damn well isn’t.”

“Then man up,” Jeff said tightly, “and start being straight with me or I can’t...I can’t stay, alright?”

“Jeff...” Will knew he sounded frightened.

“No, don’t do that. Just...just tell me, ok? Tell me.”

“What?”

“Why you lied to me.”

“What? Lied to you? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Freddie Lounds called me.”

“She *what?*” Will knew he sounded dangerous, because there was a pause, “Jeff? How’d she even get your damn number?”

“Don’t know. Reporters have their ways, I suppose.”

“Jesus,” Will blinked away the black spots in his vision, “Did you...did you speak to her?”

“Uh huh. I nearly hung up a few times, but yeah.”

“Why the hell did you..?” he snapped his mouth shut, swallowing, “What did she want?”

“She was fishing, for stuff on you. No,” he said quickly, “before you ask I didn’t tell her anything. As if I would. Still, think she ended up giving me more than I gave her.”

“Whatever she told you, don’t believe it. Ok? Freddie likes embellishing the truth.”

“She told me there was never a divorce.”

Will ground his lip between his teeth. His eyes hurt. He thought it might be the start of a headache, but, regardless, his eyes hurt. When he focused harder he thought everything might be starting to hurt.

“What?”

“She told me you’re still married.”

“What the hell has that got to do with anything?”

“God,” he heard Jeff say, as if to himself, followed by a sad, soft, aborted laugh, “then she wasn’t yanking my chain.”

“Jeff...”

“Are you for real?” Milo asked, sounding fed up and spoiling for a fight, “After everything you ever told me about what he did to you, and the first thing you did *wasn’t* to get a divorce from the psycho?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh yeah? I think it might be, sweetheart. Susan was quick enough to drop that bombshell on me.”

“She asked for a *divorce*?”

“I guess that’s what happens when you find out your husband is fucking another guy.”

“Shit,” Will rubbed at his eyes, “I thought you said it wasn’t because of...” he stalled, hating the guilt that nipped at him, “how did she..?”

“We weren’t exactly discreet,” Jeff sounded cut up, “That’s what I deserve for getting us drunk and screwing in the house. Tony must have seen something, he told her...god I don’t know. Something I couldn’t exactly get out of.”

“Get out of?”

“God, that came out wrong...”

“No, I don’t think it did,” Will said coldly.

“I just meant this is going to make everything a lot harder. And who the hell are you to talk? When were you gonna tell me all this? Or were you ever? That you’re still hitched to a serial killer and you don’t seem in any hurry to change that. He’s the reason you lost Elle in the first place, Will, god*dammit!*”

“She told you that, huh,” Will felt his fingers tighten around the phone.

“Why’d you lie to me?” Jeff sounded sad and Will hated it, “Did you think I wouldn’t help you out if I knew?”

“I wasn’t crazy, ok? I was just...just...”

“Psychotic.”

“Post-natal psychosis doesn’t mean I was psychotic,” Will bit out.

“You told me you were depressed. Jesus, Will, she told me. She told me what you were like, hallucinating, hurting yourself...”

“And you just fucking believed her?” Will snarled down the phone.

“Is it true?”

“It’s not that simple...”

“Is it *true*?”

“What does it matter if it was? I got through it and that’s what fucking matters! I got through it.”

“Oh, you mean when you tried to drown yourself?” Jeff asked bluntly, “Is that the ‘got through it’ you’re talking about?”

“You don’t know,” Will said, toxic with resentment, “you son of a bitch, why would you..?"

“You’re fucking *married* to him!” Jeff managed not to shout, yet the force of the words was still noticeable, “And you seem pretty determined to stay tied to all the poisonous crap in your past. I remember, Will,” the anger seemed to give way to the hurt and Will curled in on himself, “I remember when you filled that glass with rum and watched those photographs melt away. And you promised yourself something you obviously couldn’t keep.”

“It’s not...”

“Do you still love him?”

“...No,” Will knew he’d hesitated too long; the thought made him feel ill.

“Fuck,” Jeff said breathily, “I’m beginning to feel like a sucker here, you know that?”

“Jeff, please, just let me...”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

The line rang dead. Will lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. It seemed to shift, shadows flickering like those cast by firelight. He closed his eyes and felt gravity shift in his mind’s eye. He thought he heard words from long ago: *each mortal thing does one thing and the same, crying what I do is me, for that I came.* Hannibal’s voice, heard as from just over his shoulder.

A doomed fool, he thought, that’s what you are. Moth to a flame. The once burnt, twice shy, try-again-guy. Don’t you get it? Don’t you? *The just man justices*. And all else falls to the wayside.

When Will forced himself to sit up, the walls decided to get in on the action, twisting to and fro. The bottle was empty when he upended it. He grabbed for another, careless of the label; it was clear and sweet but with a bitter aftertaste. Soon it was gone too. *As tumbled over rim in roundy wells,* he heard, face twisting, *stones ring.* Everything in this world had its place, and he knew his even as he loathed it.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame. Will felt himself drawing his hand over the duvet. He sat down with a heavy bounce.

“I remember, you read to me,” he muttered; Will lay back and curled up on his side, eyes stinging, “Read to me some more.”

Shall I tell you a story?

He wondered how long it would take Jeff to pack up and leave. For a moment Will thought he hated him, then remembered that he cared about him a great deal and that only made the pain all the sharper. He couldn’t leave Elle alone. He couldn’t. But he had to. *He had to stop the fairy leading the goblins downhill to eat up families whole in their beds.*

“Tell me a story,” he implored softly, “to send me to sleep.”

Let me tell you a story, dearest. Let me take you far from here...

The next hour passed in a haze. Will went from bottle to bottle until all that were left were small, glass shells filled with nothing but dregs. And Hannibal’s voice went with him.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I have messed with the idea of the Memory Palace a little, but I feel the idea of Hannibal being able to walk in and out of memories not too far fetched. To have and idea linked to a sound and a smell inspired by an object would be plausible in such a technique. So hopefully that came across well.

Also the title of this chapter and the poem Will hears Hannibal reading to him at the end is by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Victorian poet very much before his time. His works are for the phonetically minded. His assonance and consonance make me wobbly at the knees.

Resting on the Stone Steps

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spending the night there had been like putting his head in the mouth of a shark with no teeth: bizarrely lacking in tension. Will had thought the rented apartment would feel like a shooting gallery, but he had been able to sleep without any more disturbance than in his hotel room. Well, what little sleep he'd managed to get.

He had eaten dinner alone, then called Marquez at half six to speak to Elle. She told him Milo had gone. *'To see his wife at her sister's in Virginia'* she said. Agent Whitward had been sent with him as a precaution. Will had mumbled something, perhaps an affirmation, perhaps something else. When his daughter was eventually put on the line he had little else left to give.

"Daddy," Elle had said slowly, worriedly, "I don't wanna go t'bed."

"You have to sweetheart," sitting on the floor, leaning against his own untouched bed, Will had found it difficult to sound anything but hollow, "I'll be there when you wake up."

"There's somthin' in there."

"No, honey, there's nothing there. Nothing but you."

"I don't wanna sleep there. Can I sleep wif you?"

"Not tonight."

"But I..." things had gone on that way until Marquez had reappeared to take a tearful Elle to her bed.

Sleep hadn't come easy. Will felt that closing his eyes was foolish. *The monsters waited there*. He pulled open his laptop and tried to work on what few leads he thought needed followed up. When that went nowhere but a swift headache and a creeping sensation of hopelessness, he had a look at Freddie's article on *Tattler.com*.

The pictures told a story the words didn't. *Will next to Freddie, smiling a soft smile, hand on her shoulder as she stood, shoulders back and head high beside him.* Will was sure no one but him could see the sensation of nausea and disgust the photo version of himself felt, except maybe Jack and Alana. Even then he was sure he was the only one who knew how much he hoped it would backfire on the gloating hack.

Tip toeing through the minefield, darling, Hannibal said, *It's not as easy as it looks.*

"Sure it is," Will answered as he closed the laptop with a snap, "You just have to keep your feet off the ground."

Then he'd climbed into bed and wished he wasn't as calm as he felt. Had closed his eyes and worried himself as he smiled at the monsters there. Had dreamed and in his dreams he had wished. *Wished for things not meant for wishing*.

Waking came with a helping of Christmas-morning excitement. Something made him overly aware of the snipers watching the building. Getting dressed became an exercise in deliberate movement, shirt buttoned slowly, tie tied with precision. Will wondered if he had ever felt more alone while under the watchful eyes of so many. The thought made him think of his daughter waking up without him. *How long are you going to break her heart?* he chastised himself. It made his fingers ache. He scratched it away.

Will was shaving when the call came in; it was answered with anticipation hidden expertly under caution.

"Good morning," he said.

"Not so good," Crawford replied in a blank voice, making Will's enthusiasm waver, "The Fairy got Lounds in Chicago."

"Oh hell," Will was able to say, even as part of him warmed with pleasure at the thought, *trussed up and taken apart piece by piece, I bet, just like she did to you, right Will?* He swallowed and started shivering, *you're a fucking monster, Graham,* "oh hell no."

"She's not dead yet and she's asking for you. It won't be long."

The thought of seeing her made his lips quiver, though he wasn't sure what with, "I'll go."

"Meet me at the airport. United 245. It leaves in forty minutes. You can be back for the stake-out, if it's still on."

Hannibal found him in the sitting room, naked against the glow of the moonlight from the window. The sight was enough to arrest him from his exit, which he had been sure he would be able to make silently and with little fuss. You are too used to being alone, he thought as he approached Will's seemingly inert form. Manoeuvring around this new addition to his household was tricky.

You are the one who asked him to stay, his conscience reprimanded. Hannibal had little to say to that. It had been a wonderfully freeing gesture, inviting Will to live with him, the rashness of which he loved for its rarity. A poor choice of word, he thought. Hannibal Lecter was not rash, though he was, on occasion, impulsive. Will brought out the impulsiveness in him. The thought made his lips quirk.

The man in question was still as a marble carved mirage, all angles and shadows over his chest and legs, across his face cast by the crown of curls. His grey eyes seemed nothing but pale slits in the gloom, his hands resting against the windowsill delicately as he opened his mouth to speak.

“There are spiders in the garden.”

His last two steps towards Will were taken as cautiously as Hannibal would allow himself to. For a moment he considered that Will could be sleepwalking, though he had not observed the behaviour in the man before then. Hannibal enjoyed the continued random element of Graham and the constant source of new experiences he offered. This was something new and interesting. *He would not pass up the opportunity, if it presented itself.*

Hannibal stood beside him and drew the curtain back with his hand, staring outside.

“They cannot come in,” he said calmly.

“You see them too then, I thought it was just me,” Will sounded as if he were vindicated, blinking slowly as he tore his eyes away to look at him; his stare was part vacant, part dreadfully aware, “you’re going out.”

“My beeper woke me. There’s been a rush at work. I will be back as soon as I can,” Hannibal ran his hand through Will’s soft hair.

The absurd nicety of their odd situation seemed to help Will to find a smile. Hannibal stayed especially still as Will reached up to place his fingers against his cheek, thumb by the edge of Hannibal’s mouth.

“Can’t be soon enough,” he whispered before leaning into the embrace. Will’s naked skin kissed Hannibal’s hands as he slid them across his flesh and Will sighed against the caress, rubbing his face against his smooth cyan shirt. The press of lips to his ear made him grip tighter to Hannibal’s arms even as the other man leaned back.

“You are a difficult man to refuse,” Hannibal’s smiling lips spoke, “and to part company with. I will return before dawn.”

“I’ll be upstairs. Away from the spiders.”

“Of course, dearest.”

A soft kiss upon his forehead, and Hannibal led Will to the stairs, watched as he climbed them slowly. The play of muscles along his back, down across his buttocks and his thighs, highlighted by moonlight through glass, was mesmerising. Hannibal thought of the Piazza della Signoria *in Florence, the statue of Perseus upon the defeated medusa, her severed head in his tight fist. Will showed the same beauty of form, interplay of light and dark on his youthful body, and the same capability for savagery resting beneath. The thought made his quirked lips tick higher. When he heard the bedroom door close he left through the front.*

Despite his misgivings, he had to admit a month of cohabitation had done him wonders. He felt awake, highly aware, his appreciation of food and art and music seemed to be enhanced as he revelled in introducing Will to a new level of luxuries. The world appeared to have taken on a sharp edge. Hannibal had been initially cautious when toying with the thought of asking Will to live with him. It would be inconvenient in many ways, such as was being shown tonight. Of course there was an element of welcome danger there which threw a little spice

into the mix. Hannibal did love a challenge, and working his hobby around Will's keen intelligence was a wonderful challenge indeed.

Eventually the Bentley purred along the uneven road, the empty grain silos standing like silent watchers as he passed, the small barn illuminated piece by piece through the watery light of the headlamps. It was cooler out here, Hannibal thought as he exited, slightly damp. The grass smelled fresh, as if it had rained that evening.

Hannibal wondered at the images Will had seen as he pulled out his deadbolt keys and crunched across the gravel towards the barn. Spiders; dreaming of silken webs in the dark. The web of manipulation, the ambush, the trap, spinning clever silk around their prey until they were helpless and paralysed to its will. Hannibal hummed as he opened the door's many locks and closed them with just as much care behind himself. The spider was a symbol of strategy and dark works to many.

Is he suspicious? Hannibal wondered. It seemed too much to hope for, but Will's mind was beautifully sharp in its intricate architecture. Hannibal had already observed the magnificent leaps of connection he was capable of, the terrifying absorption of thought he was able to employ when stalking his prey.

And yet I wish to be careful, Hannibal thought, opening the last door. The sound of his movement set off the muffled gurgles and sounds of feeble straining, creaking leather, a few wet flops. I wish to be careful so as to keep him close while holding him at arm's length. The thought made Hannibal frown as he pulled down his plastic suit from its hanger and slid into it with practiced ease.

"Hetho? Tho'body?" came the lisp laden pleading, "P-p-pthese hep ee. Hetho?"

It was somewhat disconcerting to think, Hannibal thought as he pulled the zip tight and donned the thick rubber gloves he kept sterilized in the drawer. He wanted to keep Will Graham. He wondered if it were possible, frowning as he sorted his equipment, scalpel, forceps, swabs, medicinal alcohol, arterial ties. He turned on the main spotlight and illuminated the man restrained to the operating table in the centre of the room, flat on his back, cheeks missing and the wounds bandaged with expert care, enough to allow him to look straight through from one side of his face to the other. While he observed him calculatingly, Hannibal thought of a quick and simple experiment.

As he watched the man's crusty eyes light up in terror on spying him, Hannibal imagined his life without Will Graham in it. The result was instantaneous.

"How utterly colourless it would be," he murmured to himself as he picked up the bone saw in one hand and a pre-prepared syringe of local anaesthetic in the other.

"No, no, pthese no*," the man was begging, tears running down over what was left of his chubby face into his wispy hair, "don pthese! I can get oo cash, anythin'!"*

"All that would be left would be this," Hannibal sighed to the man on the table, "the same pale imitations dancing around my dinner parties, the same bereft beings before me like

paper chain cut-outs. And then where would we be? Right back to where I started. That's no way to progress, is it Mr. Bartland?"

"Oh god, I don wan tho die," the man sobbed messily, spitting up over his fat chin, "I have a daughther. Why a' oo doin thith? Don kill ee, pthease, don kill ee."

"Well, perhaps not tonight then," Hannibal smiled down at the man as he thought of the beautiful creature waiting for him at home, draped across his silk sheets like an Italian dream, "just a little off the top?"

"Pthease, pthease..!"

Hannibal did so love a challenge.

The corridor of Paege Burn Centre was a tube of spotless tile. A tall doctor with a curiously old-young face beckoned Will and Crawford over when he spied them storming down the hallway towards Lounds' door. Will felt itchy all over, like ants on his skin, but managed to stay still enough to listen to the doctor's spiel.

"You must be the Agent Lounds was asking for."

Will knew the doctor wasn't asking, but he replied regardless, "Yeah. Yeah I am."

"Her wounds are fatal, I thought you should know. I *can* help her with the pain and I intend to do it. She breathed flames and her throat and lungs are damaged. She may not regain consciousness. Honestly? In her condition that would be a blessing.

"However, in the event she does regain consciousness, the city police have asked me to take the airway out of her throat so she might answer questions, if she can. I've agreed to try that, briefly," the doctor stressed the word; Will felt the itch intensify, "at the moment her nerve endings are anaesthetised by fire but a lot of pain is coming."

"We won't get in the way of your treatment, doctor," Jack said, stony faced, "but Lounds might be able to help us save more lives."

"I made this clear to the police..." the doctor said harshly.

Will started scratching at his neck, *must be bad, so fucking bad, he took her, had her all night, then whoosh,* he could see it, almost see it, smell it, feel it, *Freddie rolling down the street on fire, must have been quite a sight.*

"Whatever's possible, that's all I'm asking."

"I'll interrupt any attempted questioning to sedate her if she wants me to. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Crawford said, no nonsense.

It seemed to be enough. Will stared at the door, his breathing long and shallow, the nails at his neck scratching over reddened, irritated skin. *Did you think about it?* he wondered, *Did you think about what you'd do to the fuckers that told the lies? Incontinent, impotent, repressed homosexual, ugly, shameful; that's what I said about you.*

"Will?"

Have you thought about it? What you want to do to me when you get your hands on me, huh?

He looked over slowly when Crawford repeated his name, "Hmm?"

"You okay?"

"I'm ok," Will said, feeling marginally appalled with himself whilst simultaneously resisting the urge to laugh, "*I* had the S.W.A.T. team looking after me."

"Yeah, I guess you did," Crawford didn't seem to enjoy the insinuation, "hey, you're bleeding."

"What?"

"Your neck."

Will watched as Jack turned to walk towards the room. He looked in a window to his right, the surface bright and reflective. When he brought his hand down he found the nails bloody and the pain blossomed on his skin. *All the times the pain was better out than in, better to see the blood run than feel the crawling sickness inside, right Will?* He shivered again, having to bite down on the need to continue. *Get in that room*, he ordered himself, *get in that room and see what you've done*.

Lounds' head was elevated in the bed. For a moment it was almost stranger to see her without her mass of red curls than it was to see her so mutilated and deformed. It took him a moment to realise her ears were gone along with her hair and compresses had been taped over her sightless eyes to replace the burned off lids. Around the thick, corrugated tube leading down into her throat her gums were puffed with blisters.

The nurse beside him moved an I.V. laden with fluids and pain killers to allow Will to come close. He sat down quietly. Lounds smelled like a stable fire.

"Freddie, it's Will Graham."

When she arched her neck against the pillow Will didn't flinch, even though he caught Jack start out the corner of his eye. The nurse was at her side, checking her readouts.

"Is she awake?" Will asked, not taking his eyes from Lounds.

"It's just a reflex," the nurse said, "she's not conscious."

The nurse moved back and Will felt it, *he knew he felt it.* He looked down. The noises of the room, the voices talking, the beeping machinery, the sounds of the hospital beyond the door,

they all faded into a muffled mass. When the black, claw-like hand touched his Will took a long, low breath. It felt as if he were being touched by death itself. The pale detective sergeant in the corner and Crawford talked in low voices. They continued even as Will watched Freddie reach up with cracking skin and pull the tube from her mouth. Will stared, hand held tightly in place by charcoal fingers. Her receding lips bled as she spoke.

You've come to see the other side?

"You must have known," he whispered, "you knew doing this would bring you here."

You would know, her pulled back lips grinned like split fish scales, *putting your hand on my shoulder like I was a friend, a filthy little friend. Patting your target onto my back when I wasn't looking.*

(Bitter. Like ashes in your mouth, Will could hear Hannibal was smiling, despite not being able to see him, *forgive the unfortunate wording, Miss Lounds. How distasteful of me.)*

"What goes around comes around," Will said solemnly, "is that what you want me to say? Can't make me think I am what you wanted me to be Freddie. I'm not that damn callous."

Sure you are, she said, choking out a laugh that shook her ruined lungs, *you like to think you're so damn clever. Removed from the mad dogs you chase down. Is it like being part of the life you always needed? Hmm?*

"I don't..." Will swallowed, staring at the hand as it curled tighter, fingers snapping off, "I'm sorry Freddie. I'm real damn sorry."

Open your eyes, wacko. The least you can do is not fool yourself like you fooled me.

"Hey."

Will looked up sharply to find the sergeant looking at him, his dark brown eyes accusingly narrowed. He didn't reply, just waited, feeling the man's animosity like heat against his skin. *How long did she feel it? How long did it crisp before the heat turned to singing, numb acceptance?* When he looked back to Freddie she was unmoved from when they'd entered, still unconscious, airway still in place, lips inert, hands by her sides.

"You're not saying much Graham," the detective continued, "You had plenty to say in the *Tattler*."

"Someone outside said there's a recording," Will said.

"Jesus," the man shook his head, the paleness of disgust now tinged with anger, "I'd heard you were a piece of work. Gotta listen to the stories more often."

"We're not here for stories Sergeant," Jack cut in, though he was avoiding Will's gaze as best he could, "if there's anything that could help us find this bastard, we need to hear it."

"Yeah," the man said, nodding loosely; he looked at Will and Will avoided his eyes, focussing on his left shoulder, "Lounds said your name in the ER before they put the airway

in."

"You were there?" Crawford asked.

"Not then, later I was there, but I have what she said on tape. The reporters, some *Tattler* people had followed the ambulance. Here, I've got it here..."

In a sudden, blinding moment of panic, Will felt the need to stand up, be seen, shout out *don't play it, don't fucking play it, please don't*. Instead he sat perfectly still next to Freddie and said, "Let me hear it."

The detective fiddled with the recorder he pulled from the bag by his chair. Will wanted to ask if there were earphones. He needed to keep Freddie contained, deep down inside. The thought of her voice seeping out into the room made the itch return. The sergeant didn't seem interested in making this easy on him. Will kept his mouth a tight line as the recording played.

He heard voices, a rattle of casters, 'put her in on three,' the bump of a litter on a swinging door, hurried footsteps and an echoing expansion of people speaking, a retching cough and a voice croaking, speaking without lips.

'*Tooth Hairy*,' it said.

'Freddie did you see him? What did he look like Freddie?'

'Wendy? Hlease Wendy. Graham se ne uh. The cunt knew it. Graham set ne uh. Cunt tut his hand on ne in the ticture,' a break in the voice and a thump as of doors crashing, 'like a hucking tet.'

A noise like a drain sucking. A new voice, authoritative, a doctor's voice, 'That's it. Let me get there. Get out of the way. *Now*.'

The recording stopped, leaving a dull resonance of panic and pain in its wake. Will took a long, deep breath. He didn't move from Freddie's side.

"Who's Wendy?" he asked after a few moments' silence.

"The hooker in the hall," the detective said tightly, "the blonde omega with the chest. She's been trying to get in and see her. Doesn't know anything."

"Why don't you let her in?" Will frowned, a sudden indignance rising in him; the itch at his neck flared. He couldn't stop his hand rushing to it, the pain like burning fire as he scratched and scratched.

"Can't let her partner see her like this, poor girl'll probably pass right out."

"They're bonded?" Jack asked seriously; Will hated the superior alpha coming out in the man.

"No, nothing in the records," the detective said, "but I was told no visitors."

“This woman is dying,” Will said, almost as if to himself, hackles rising at the insinuation; *an omega couldn’t handle it, an omega was to be sheltered and protected, an omega would break*.

“Think I don’t know that? I’ve been here since quarter to fucking six o’clock – sorry nurse.”

“Take a few minutes,” Jack said diplomatically; Will was glad someone was still able to be, “get some coffee, put some water on your face. She can’t say anything and if she does we’ll be here with the recorder.”

“Ok...ok thanks,” the detective said, rubbing at his eyes, “I could use it.”

Once he was gone Will stood up and walked out into the hall. Jack didn’t stop him. *You owe her this, don’t you? You owe her this at least.*

I owed it to you Will, Hannibal said from somewhere behind him, *but I could not give it to you. I feel a shame I should not possess. You could not forgive me and it breaks my heart.*

Will closed his eyes and felt sick. The woman was sitting on the hard plastic chairs a few feet down the hall, back ramrod straight. Her purple nail polish was cracked from biting and her hair had been done in a hurry. Will thought he might be able to smell her distress.

“Wendy?”

She looked up like a dear in headlights, though Will thought the reaction might have been less surprised and more terrified of the words about to come out of his mouth.

“If you’re sure you want to go in there, I’ll take you.”

“They said no visitors.”

“That’s ok. I’ll take you.”

“Maybe I aughta comb my hair.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

When the detective returned he didn’t try to put her out. Will liked to think the man judged him less harshly for the gesture. Will knew it wasn’t true. For some unforeseeable reason the thought made his insides twist. *They all hate you, you know that right?* Lounds said, *You’re the freak here, Graham*.

“Don’t worry sweetie,” Wendy was saying as Lounds stirred, “it’s gonna be fine. We’ll have us some high old times, won’t we?”

Will stopped scratching when the stickiness at his fingers became wet. Lounds stirred again and then died.

It was a long drive, made longer by the silence. Alana wished she'd had her car cleaned before the visit. It wasn't as if she wasn't used to meeting influential people, or trying to impress, she'd been to enough of Hannibal's parties after all.

The thought left her cold. All that time, and he was right there. Right there and you watched him and spoke to him and learned from him and fell in love with him and he was...

"Do you mind if I turn the heater on?" Will interrupted her thoughts.

"Sure, here I'll get it. The controls in this car drive me nuts. It's just...there. Too hot?" she asked; Will shook his head, "alright."

She knew she was beginning to ramble but it was difficult to stop. They were the first words Will had said since she'd put her foot on the gas. Starting a conversation had been a hellish thought, so much so that she hadn't tried. This isn't your fault, *she tried to reason*, it isn't. *And it wasn't, she knew it wasn't, but the feeling was always there, itching and burning.*

You introduced them. You did. Stupid and foolish and irrational, the thought still stuck. *You watched Hannibal wear him down until Will did the one thing he'd never do for you: he opened up.*

"Do I have to call from the gate?" Alana asked as they approached a wide set of curlicue bars, locked solid like an authority figure.

"Yeah," Will said, and nothing more.

The grounds were extensive, so much so that Alana was beginning to feel a little small. Lost inside the vast arena. Can't be out of your depth here, she told herself*, it's not you that you're here for. When the mansion rolled into view she wished she could stand by her conviction. Christ on a bike,* she thought, *they weren't kidding.*

An imposing block of Georgian architecture, like a glimpse into an English estate, the lawn stretching out front beyond the fountain and the perfectly level gravel driveway. The house was vast but somehow discreet, refusing to be exposed to any of the foppish frippery of excess decoration or the garishness of gothic embellishment.

"I wonder if they still have that fucking peacock," Will muttered as he stared out the window.

"Let's just hope they open the doors," she said in reply.

A butler came to meet them at the bottom of the wide, palisade lined staircase. Alana stepped out. Will did not.

"Dr. Bloom?" he asked.

"That's right," she said, her smile just for show.

"Please, follow me. Will Mr. Graham be accompanying you?"

Alana looked back into the car. Will was looking away from her, staring out of the window at the lawn as if seeing something only he could, "No," she said, "just me."

"Very good ma'am."

The house appeared to be just as restrained yet ostentatious on the inside as on the outside. Alana couldn't help looking around her as she was led through. Jesus, no wonder Will didn't want to come inside, she thought. She felt intimidated purely by being led to a room in the West Wing, she could only imagine what it was like to stay here and mingle. It sounded like hell.

"Dr. Alana Bloom to see you, Lady Murasaki."

The room was softly furnished in creams and yellows, mahogany for the wood in the upholstery, oak for the bookcases. Lady Murasaki sat upon a low cushion on the floor, a wide-headed paintbrush in her hand. She did not look up as Alana took a few steps into the room and stopped; she heard the butler leave as Lady Murasaki pushed the paintbrush down onto the roll of paper before her, pulling black ink across its pale surface.

"I see he did not come with you," she said in a staid but authoritative voice.

"If you're asking about Will Graham, he's outside."

"Exactly," Lady Murasaki said as she finally looked up to acknowledge Alana, "it is always pleasing to know my assessments were not in vain."

"I'm here to talk about Eleanor," Alana refused to let this woman manoeuvre her.

"Of course you are. Though there is little to say."

"We've got a strong case, more than enough. Stretching this out is only going to hurt Eleanor in the long run. She should be with her father."

"She should be with people who can look after her," Lady Murasaki said, her voice barely changed yet it emoted a chill note which made the hair's on the back of Alana's neck stand up. She'd heard it before. Hannibal had been a master of subtlety.

"I would have thought you would be able to appreciate what Will is going through," Alana said, "I'll take it I'm not too presumptuous to assume he isn't the only one suffering through Hannibal's loss?"

"I was not informed I had lost *my nephew."*

"I see. Then I guess I know which way this is going to go. It's nice to know you'd put your own wants over Eleanor's welfare," Alana said facetiously.

"Hannibal deserves better," Lady Murasaki said tightly, putting her paintbrush back onto its simple holder; the paper had become alive with a striking symbol that Alana could not decipher. A slinking black snake of ink, twisted and jagged.

“Hannibal is a murderer,” Alana couldn’t stop her own hurt filtering into her words, “and he revoked his rights to any such luxury the moment he took a human life.”

“I will not allow my grand-niece to be kept in the care of a lunatic.”

The first instinct was to defend Will’s sanity, yet what came out of her mouth was, “I’m not so sure about that,” Alana said caustically.

Thankfully she was spared another retort by the door bursting open. A young woman with short black hair stood panting in the doorway, her pretty face the picture of worry.

“My Lady, I’m so sorry, he just came in, I couldn’t stop him.”

“What are you babbling about Julia?” Lady Murasaki asked, standing gracefully.

Alana already knew what was coming, though she wished she were wrong. She hurried with them back to the foyer, though when Lady Murasaki and Julia continued on into the house on panicked feet, Alana stopped.

The air was warm in the sunshine, though cool in the shade. Will had managed to sit himself on the lawn in just the right spot, hidden behind Alana’s car. She approached him cautiously, then realised she was doing so and felt instantly guilty. You think he’s dangerous too, her conscience supplied*. She wasn’t going to deny it. She didn’t want to be a bigger hypocrite than she already felt.*

When she was close enough she sat down next to him. In his arms Will was cradling his daughter, wrapped in swaddling clothes with her chubby arms free and waving. When Alana looked at her the baby caught and held her stare, her mouth turning up into a childish smile which let out a laugh.

“I think she likes you,” Will murmured.

“You can’t just...”

“I know. I wasn’t going to...I know. Just wanted to see her.”

“This why you asked to come?”

“No. Not really. I don’t know. Maybe,” Will sorted Eleanor into a better position, allowing the baby to coo at the movement.

The crunch of gravel alerted her to their approach. Alana reached out and put her hand on Will’s shoulder. She thought he might have flinched. When he looked at her she felt like flinching too.

“I want her back, Alana,” he said with the tone of a dying man; full of regret and resignation, “I need her back with me.”

“We’ll figure this out, Will, I promise.”

They stood up as the others approached. Lady Murasaki looked utterly composed but for the bright red spots high upon her cheeks. The butler and Julia hovered in the background as she walked towards Will and Alana.

"You are not fit*," she said, low and angry.*

"Been hearing that from you for years," Will said without humour, "got anything new up your sleeve?"

"She needs somewhere safe to live, and you cannot give that to her!"

"Safe?" Will sneered, "You mean the place I was able to walk in and take her from without the least resistance? Yeah, real damn safe."

Lady Murasaki said nothing in reply. Instead she gestured to Julia, making the young woman bounce forwards. When she approached Will, however, she lost all enthusiasm. He was looking at Eleanor, a little lost though the fondness was clear. When Julia lifted her arms silently Will handed her over without a fight. Alana felt herself relax.

"Keep a better eye on her next time?" he said to the young woman.

"I will, I'm sorry," she murmured, before hurrying off, the butler keeping his arm around her shoulder as he escorted her back to the house.

The three were left on the lawn. Alana felt as if she were between two predators, circling each other without moving an inch. It seemed surreal, to be standing here between them. There were years of history here that Alana couldn't fathom, and wasn't sure she wanted to. Will wouldn't want her to look. Still, she stood by him in case he did.

"You cannot come here," Lady Murasaki said peremptorily.

"Do I remind you of things you'd rather forget?" Will rejoined.

"You are not fit*," she repeated acidly, "and you have no loyalty to my family. I owe you nothing."*

"Oh I see," Will, hands in his pockets, shook his head, "this is because of the trial. I get it. I don't show up as a witness for the defence because I'm in hospital with a shattered clavicle and a bad case of losing my mind, and you blame me for where he is now. Right?"

"You abandoned him in his time of need. Would you have come to his side if you were able?"

"He put a fucking knife to my throat," Will said, low and dangerous.

"He would never *have hurt you."*

"Maybe not," Will didn't sound convinced, "but maybe he would. I guess we'll never know now."

"You believe he is guilty."

“I know he’s guilty. They convicted him of killing thirty five people. Personally, I think it might have been more.”

“You are not fit,” she breathed, eyes gleaming.

There was a terse moment, during which Will did nothing but stare at her. Alana would give Lady Murasaki the little credit she was able; not many could withstand Will’s gaze when it finally caught your eye.

“You knew,” Will said with a bitter smile; she opened her mouth to protest but Will continued, “don’t play with me. You knew what he was, you just wished that you didn’t.”

“I do not need your accusations...”

“And you hate that he loves me,” Will frowned, looking down at the grass beneath his feet, “and you hate that I love him too, don’t you. You can’t stand it, never have been able to. He was more to you once, wasn’t he? You know I was never sure. Does the Count know?”

“Keep away from my family,” she ground out, shaking with rage, “keep away from my house, and keep away from Eleanor.”

“Take good care of her,” Will said as he turned to leave, “while you have the chance.”

The drive home was just as quiet. Alana turned the heater on even though she felt hot. Everything she’d heard rolled around in her head like jagged spikes, piercing everything they touched.

Will closed his eyes and rested his head against the window. He was asleep in minutes.

Will came in at 9 p.m., tired and wet. He had not eaten since breakfast and the thought of food repelled him. It took him a few goes to get the key in the lock, then a further few to find the right turning point for the unfamiliar key. The Justice Department maintained several small apartments near the Seventh District court, for jurists. Will had been given one, Crawford another across the hall.

It felt like a game of leapfrog, jumping from place to place, getting one over on each other. *Will got one over the Fairy, the Fairy got one over him*. Again and again and again. Will wondered who would be on top in the final game. It had him heading for the fridge.

With Lounds dead it seemed likely he was next. Will hadn’t been able to think about that. All he could picture were all the people he’d dragged into this with him. The Tooth Fairy, or the *Red Dragon* as he was now calling himself, seemed quite happy to torture him before going in for the kill. Take out everyone around him in a systematic fashion, that's what he seemed to be planning. The guy wasn’t stupid. Will kind of wished he was. It would make things a hell of a lot easier.

Elle had been taken to a secure location by Spurgen, the chief S.W.A.T. instructor and his team. Even Will didn't know where she was now. For a moment he blanked. *Not right,* where is she, *not right,* where is she, *not right.* The repeated thoughts made his mind turn over and his insides squirm. He tried not to think about it too much. It had been years since they'd been apart for this long. Even longer since he'd not known where she was at all times. Normally Will verged on panic attacks when he couldn't find her in a department store. Right now the only thing stopping him from flipping out was the gin in his hand. He drank it neat to speed up the process.

When his phone rang Will was thinking about Valerie Leeds. *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I can't be what you need. I want to catch him for you, I want to, I will, I swear it*. It wasn't a good way to start a conversation.

"Will?" it was Jeff. For a moment he wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm here."

"Thank Christ. I just read the news about Lounds. Are you ok?"

"Am *I* ok? Yeah I'm ok. Of course *I'm* ok."

"I'm glad. I was worried. And Elle?"

"Yeah, she's safe. S.W.A.T. are looking after her."

"You're not with her?"

"It's not such a good idea for us to be together right now."

A pause. The rain beat against the window, loud in the silence.

"You think he's coming after you," Jeff said, deadpan.

"How's Richmond, Jeff?"

"Don't. Don't do that. I...I had to come out here. I wish I didn't, ok? Why do you have to..?"

"Have to what?"

"Make it so damn difficult to love you."

"Who knows. Maybe it's habit. How's Anthony doing?"

Will could tell Jeff wanted to say more. When he spoke his voice was a little strangled, "He's fine. Misses Elle something fierce though. I guess we all do."

"Yeah. Yeah I guess we do. Susan still asking for that divorce?"

"I think she's calmed down a little. Nothing's fixed, I'm not crazy enough to believe that but...I don't know. Dammit Will, that's not why I called."

“Then why did you?”

“You sound a little slurry. You been to your friend in the fridge?”

“I’ve had a couple. Damn,” he chuckled hollowly, “I feel like every time I speak to you you’re further away from me.”

“Will...”

My clever little mongoose, how I miss you while you are gone. Will felt the voice coast against his neck, over the bruised and broken skin where his nails had cut through, now scabbed and messy. When he said the words, he wasn’t sure who he was saying them to.

“I miss you.”

“Shit,” Milo sounded hollowed out, “why’d you have to take it huh? Why’d you have to take this fucking job?”

“Fate, I guess.”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“Liar.”

“Yeah,” Jeff laughed, startled and high pitched, “I am. I guess I am. Always thought there was something in the way we met, you know. If fate ever existed, it was with us. God, this is hard.”

Will closed his eyes and felt the tears he hadn’t noticed leak out, rushing down to drip off his chin. He wiped roughly at his face. *There was a feeling of a hand at his back, holding him steady.* Will shivered.

“Calling to say goodbye?”

“Don’t call it that.”

“I don’t like to mince words,” Will placed his forehead against the cool window and watched sheets of rain whip over the muffled traffic below him; over the phone he thought he could hear other voices in the background. He listened to the sound of a closing door, “she there with you?”

“I’m at Susan’s sister’s house. She’s letting us stay here until things calm down.”

“Has she castrated you yet?”

“I’m sure she’ll get round to it,” Jeff didn’t sound like he was joking; Will wasn’t sure he’d been joking either, “Will...” Jeff stalled, not knowing what to say.

“I miss you,” he knew he was repeating himself but the drink was making his mouth move without thinking.

“Will, don’t, please...”

“I fucking miss you. I wish you were here.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I wish I didn’t. I really do. Look, hot stuff, you gonna come see us when this is over?”

“Maybe,” Will knew it was a lie, as much as Jeff’s offer was nothing but a placation, “maybe I will. Look, Jeff...isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Stay safe.”

“You’re killing me here.”

“I know. I sure know. Call me when you’re ready, ok?”

“Goodbye Milo.”

The phone felt like an omen in his hand. Horns sounded outside. Will closed his eyes and knew what this was. *The pain of abandonment.* Do you really miss him? Sheep flock together. You’re the black one, Will, the black one.

Yet we used to be black sheep together, you and I. Do you see what I have given you? the voice asked.

The rain deepened. *Tap, tap, tap* from the gutter to the windowsill. Everything shifted while staying the same, *the room darkened, the air warmed, the sound of car horns seemed to elongate.*

The phone rang after he dialled. It was easy to talk his way past the night orderly. *Urgent*, he said, *didn’t he read the papers? Hadn’t he seen Lounds' grisly death? I want put through. I want put through right goddamn now.*

Will held his gin tight in his left hand, the phone tighter in his right. It seemed to take forever. Will felt as if he were being carried with the phone, *down corridors, descending in the elevator, through doors bolted shut –heavy.* His eyes were almost closed by the time he heard the clunky sounds of a receiver being picked up.

“God has given me this,” he murmured, “beware any who would take it from me.”

A short but telling silence. Will savoured the expectation, the want, the need, the love and the cruel, cruel hate. Will looked up on instinct. He stood there, Will knew he did. Just off to his right, just out of sight. When the man spoke, Will knew he was in the room.

“Napoleon is not one to be bastardized,” Hannibal said, walking up to stand beside him, “though you always were one to take liberties.”

“I don’t know, most can stand to be misquoted when the meaning is still true,” Will shrugged, tipping his head to look right. Hannibal watched him softly, dressed in an impeccable chocolate silk waistcoat over a cream shirt. It was wrong, so wrong, that it could almost be right again, “you can’t be here, you know.”

“I thought you called me.”

“Mmm,” Will closed his eyes, “I thought that’s what I did; but I shouldn’t have. Shouldn’t ever have. You always knew what was best for me. Sometimes I didn’t.”

“I am to take it Jack Crawford has not sanctioned this call?”

“Uh uh,” Will said; he could imagine Hannibal in his cell, tight and cramped and utterly out of place, but it clashed with imagining him in the room. Will chose to stick with the room, “I’m sure I’ll hear about it tomorrow when Chilton informs him. Still. It’s not tomorrow yet, is it?”

“It is not. Though, regardless, I am still happily surprised.”

“Maybe I am too. What would you have me be Hannibal?”

“I would have you happy,” Will could still hear Hannibal’s voice, follow it as the man moved around the room, “though I am sure I am not to be believed. I did not make a good case for myself.”

“You don’t need to explain,” Will said, stepping back from the window.

When he turned he found the meagre apartment room had dissolved, replaced utterly by *their living room*. The fire in the grate was flickering. Hannibal was pouring himself brandy into a snifter. From above Will thought he could hear the water still dripping, *tap, tap, tap.*

“But I do,” Hannibal continued, “one must always prostrate themselves before love if they are to be understood. Love is the one thing that can slay without lifting a blade.”

“It depends if you grab the wrong end.”

Hannibal smiled, a small laugh escaping.

“I thought you’d like that one,” Will said, raising his eyebrows, unable to stop himself returning the smile; he walked forwards, towards the fire. When he looked inside he thought he saw a bundle wrapped in swaddling clothes. His smile died. Hannibal joined him, resting his hand at Will’s back, “did you prostrate yourself, Hannibal?”

“I make it a rule never to allow myself to be vulnerable to something capable of inflicting a mortal wound.”

“Yet you wounded me. Sometimes I think I’m still bleeding. Should I have been more careful?”

“Perhaps. May I say I am glad you were not?”

“No, you may not.”

The tapping amplified slowly, building, building. *Tap, tap,* tap, TAP. The hand slid higher. Will dragged in a long breath, eyes closing again. *The smell of wood smoke and hot, burnt flesh.*

“Why have you called me, dearest?”

“I just wanted to hear your voice. I thought I could earlier but...it was just in my head. You’re always there when I don’t need you. In the hospital after Charlotte and *I kept seeing you*. You couldn’t be there but I kept seeing you. You can’t be here now, but you are. I keep opening the door, every time you knock.”

“We are allowed nothing in our minds but what we desire most.”

“I wish it were true. I want it to be true. Are you going to press the issue?”

“If you wish to tell me you have only to say,” a pause, Will said nothing, “then I will assume you are merely in need of this.”

“I’m always in need of this, you just couldn’t...give it to me.”

“I wished to.”

“Liar. Don’t lie to me. Please.”

“You only see it as a lie if there is doubt. I thought you were past doubting me.”

“I think I’m all out of doubt. It’s just acceptance, now. I have to accept that you wanted to love me.”

“Will?”

“I’ve been fighting it, so long it’s made me ill from it. Claws in my body ripping free whenever I think I’m safe. Because I’m lonely.”

“Do you often think of me when you are lonely?”

“You’re all I think about when I’m lonely. Sometimes I try to pretend I’m thinking about others.”

“This time?”

“It didn’t last.”

“I worry for you, dear Will. So far from me, yet so near to me. The rogue is close, the wandering Pilgrim, and I know he will undo you if he can.”

“I’m near to him. Though I don’t know...if I want to be. I can’t stop it. Hannibal..?”

“I would be there with you.”

“You already are,” Will said, turning to look at the man next to him, “you already are. Lie down with me?”

“I already am.”

Upon his bed, deep inside his house, deeper inside his mind, Will Graham lay down in the arms of the man he couldn’t escape.

“Hannibal.”

“Yes dearest?”

“I forgive you.”

Chapter End Notes

And yes, I have just seen episode 2. I may still be reeling from it, and it's slid its way into this chapter. Honestly I had this chapter planned for a while, but that last line just tore me open. I had to put it in. This show, really, this show. I may not survive it.

Also I have a job interview tomorrow morning. Nerves plus Hannibal make for uneasy sleep. Wish me luck.

Also, also: for anyone who hasn't read the books, Lady Murasaki isn't Hannibal's biological aunt but his aunt through marriage, so the implied relationship isn't incestuous...just odd.

Nightingale

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this took so long, I've been really busy with RL at the moment and lots of stress from jobs and hospital and volunteering. This was a bit of a stressful chapter to write so unfortunately it took a lot longer just because I couldn't take the added stress of Will's character right now (yeeks how many times can I say the word stress?). So it's all been done in small chunks, sorry if that affects the flow of the chapter! It tried my best to make it work. Still, better late than never.
>
> Also, what the hell NBC? What the actual hell cancelling Hannibal? Here's for the lovely Mr. Lecter being picked up by some deserving channel. Also, if you haven't seen this apparently there is a live twitter feed scheduled for the next episode, where you can voice your support and try and get the attention of possible backers: see this lovely person's twitter article for more info. Bryan Fuller himself has supported it and hopefully it helps. I will personally be up at 2 in the morning joining in from the UK, because seriously, save this show:
>
> http://the-winnowing-wind.tumblr.com/post/123406792594/in-light-of-developments-new-madslibs-scheduling

In Chicago, Freddie Lounds' funeral was already underway. The hired choir at the graveside gave full measure for their money while the *Tattler* photographers' motor-driven cameras whizzed. A radio evangelist went on and on in fulsome eulogy. Wendy, Lounds' girlfriend, stood by the open grave in a black, tailored suit, her blonde wig pulled up in a bun.

When the last hymn rose, Wendy walked forwards unsteadily and lay her head on the casket, arms outstretched, while strobe lights flashed. Will Graham thought it a tasteless spectacle. He was sure Freddie would have loved it.

Once the ceremony was over, Will walked Wendy over the spongy grass to the gates while the uninvited watched them from beyond the iron fence.

"Are you alright?" he asked, because he knew he was expected to.

"Better than you," she said, "got drunk, didn't you?"

"Good to know I'm predictable even to people I barely know," Will said; it made her smile, which he appreciated at least. It took the edge off. The edge that was getting dangerously close, "is someone keeping an eye on you?"

“The precinct sent some people over. They’ve got plain-clothes at my club. Lots of business now. More weirdos than usual.”

“I’m sorry you had to...” Will faltered, *sorry you had to be a living victim in this procession of corpses*, “you had to go through this. You stayed by her, even after everything that happened. I admire that.”

“Freddie was a sport,” Wendy smiled, a little watery, “she shouldn’t have to go out that hard. Thanks for getting me in to see her, at the hospital. Look, the *Tattler* are giving me money. You figured that, right? For an interview and the dive at the graveside. I don’t think Freddie would mind.”

“She’d have been mad if you passed it up,” Will was aware of his obvious cynicism, though Wendy didn’t call him on it.

“That’s what I thought. They’re jerks, but they’ll pay. Thing is, they tried to get me to say that you did it on purpose, you know, being friendly in that picture. To get her put in the ground,” Wendy’s words stung like a sharp cut, “I didn’t say it. If they say I did, then I didn’t. I just wanted you to know.”

The sunlight filtered down through the leaves of the trees. Low voices traipsed about with ceremonial feet. But in the air a scent of death lingered. He thought he caught the sharp tang of sweat and burnt flesh. Will knew what would come, even as he tried his best to avoid it.

The memory of standing by the graveside while Hannibal watched the casket lowered, his eyes oddly calm before the morbid display. One of Hannibal’s colleagues, dead of a heart attack at thirty two, a surgeon well on the way to becoming chief of the surgical unit. Will had met her once at one of Hannibal’s dinners. She had been aloof but bearable. He thought he might have remembered her mentioning her pork tenderloin was a little too dry.

“Did you know her well?” Will had asked in a low voice; he had caught sight of her husband, staring blankly into space, as if the shock of it had just caught up with him.

“How well can anyone claim to know anyone else?” Hannibal had answered cryptically.

Hannibal had taken the position of Chief of Surgery. It had been a blessing in the disguise of a tragedy. His new promotion had allowed them to look into more expensive fertility treatments. Will remembered being happier; after two failed attempts to have children he knew he’d slipped. Had been verging on depression. Life had slowed to a crawl, but then...

Life had gone on.

Until it fell apart.

Now, as they trailed from Freddie’s funeral, the old arguments were rising from their graves. The ones which had plagued him as he lay in the hospital and stared and stared and stared at the ceiling. Did Hannibal kill her? Did he kill her? Did he?

With the silent hand of Judas the mark of the devil was cast upon her skin, Hannibal said as he looked up and caught Will's eye, *allowing the hounds of hell to scent the one who had spoken such slander.* The voice was soft, like the hissing of the wind through trees. Will listened restlessly.

When Wendy frowned Will realised she'd been speaking.

"Sorry," he said, clearing his throat, "I was..." *hearing things,* "I...what did you say?"

"You didn't like her," she said, face difficult to read but eyes lacking in accusation, "but I don't think you could have let it happen. Even if you hated Freddie's guts you still wouldn't have passed up an opportunity to get this guy."

"Yeah Wendy," Will said, trying to unclench his jaw, "I would have staked her out if I'd thought there was a chance."

"Do you have anything? I hear a lot of noise from the others, but nothing solid."

"A few things for the lab, some loose ends, but not much. They were clean sites he left us, and what we have doesn't take us far. He's lucky."

"Are you?"

"What?"

"Lucky."

"Me? Ha, well," Will realised he was grinning and knew it probably wasn't a reassuring sight, "I guess it depends who you ask."

"Seems we've both been through the mill."

"Maybe more than once."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I've got a drink for that."

"There's a drink for most things," Will said with a loose shrug and a raise of his eyebrows, "to remember, to forget. Maybe even to do both at once."

"Sounds like you've tried."

"Shouldn't I be consoling you here?" he asked with a frown and an awkward smile.

"I don't know," she said as they reached the gates, "somehow I feel like you've got the bigger loss on your shoulders."

The cut deepened, the stinging turned to lancing. Will put his hands in his pockets to hide the tremor he could feel there. Suddenly he wished he hadn't come. Everything was closer here, *closer than the death he'd walked through,* because he knew it was true, had seen it with his own eyes.

You marked her with a trail of fire, the voice was clearer, *A chariot across the sky to please the gods.*

It was inevitable that he would, eventually. Will turned. Past the procession of mourners, past Jack Crawford and Starling bringing up the rear, past the trees, past the headstone, past the upturned earth being shovelled with steady monotony, he stood by the graveside. Hands folded, head bowed, the smile an anathema of sorrow, Hannibal stood by the graveside and watched Will in return.

"I'll be fine," Will lied, unable to tear his eyes from the man who was not there.

"Well, just stay sober on the streets, ok?" Wendy said.

"I'll do that."

The drive back was difficult because Will knew it was coming. *Stupid, petty crap*, he thought, even though he knew it was justified. You were the one who couldn't control himself. *Do you think this is for you?* he asked himself, *That this is all for you?* The memory of it was still fuzzy and half-hearted, yet the heat it produced was enough to singe his self-control. The memory of the voice, *Hannibal's voice, real and rich and utterly soothing through the receiver crushed to his ear.*

He didn't regret it. He couldn't bring himself to.

The car stopped at a cross junction. Will stared at the gloomy clouds above grey buildings, Chicago's granite and sandstone, glass and steel, stood outside. He tipped down the window, letting the warm, dry air inside. It smelled like a spent sky-rocket, hot and ticklish on the nostrils. When Will pulled himself back inside the car he felt like throwing up. The latent hangover was still cloying around his nervous system. The churning in his gut whenever he thought about Eleanor only compounded the nausea. Closing his eyes didn't help.

Eyes open, car moving, buildings filtering past like a parade. Starling was silent, her face unreadable. Too much so. Will knew she was Jack's spy, reporting back to Crawford with his every move. He wondered what she thought of him, beyond her duty and the rumours he knew she must have heard. He thought he might ask her one of these days, if they ever saw the other side of all this horror.

It was another three blocks before Will couldn't take anymore.

"Are you going to say something or aren't you?"

Jack, eyebrows raised, asked, "You want to do this here?"

"Does it really make a difference?"

"I guess not. You know," Jack sniffed, rubbing at his nose, "I was thinking, earlier, about this. About what I should ask you. Whether you thought it was a necessary gesture, or this was just another of your schemes. Or maybe just a flat out mistake. But then I realised it didn't

matter, because you weren't planning on telling me what you said and what he said or why you even did it in the first place, were you?"

"I was drunk," Will shrugged; for a moment he was allowed the satisfaction of seeing Jack Crawford speechless. Starling's eyes were focused on him. She looked as if she thought he might be mad, "might still be. Not sure."

Are you happy? There was no answer. There was a need to laugh, gigglish and hysterical. He managed to resist, and instead found the peace of mind to catch Jack's eye. A steely mirror reflected his attempt.

"You think this is some sort of free ride, don't you."

"No, that's what you think of me," Will said, continuing on even as Jack opened his mouth to speak, "you want to use me and I'm letting you do it. *I'm* not blaming anyone. I honestly don't give a shit if you want to start now, but I'll admit it's pretty damn insulting."

"You..." Jack seemed to reign himself in, his lips twitching; Will raised his eyebrow to prompt the response he was sure Jack knew he shouldn't voice, "you really do, don't you."

"I really do what?"

"Forgive him," Jack's words made the nausea double.

"None of your fucking business," Will said steadily, "let me guess. Chilton records all incoming calls."

"He has *all* calls recorded, Will, outgoing too."

"Should have figured, really. Still none of your fucking business, though."

"You sure know how to push. Christ Graham," Jack rubbed at his eyes, his lips thinly pressed.

"Thought that was your job Jack?" Will pushed some more.

"Everything goes through me. No more wildcard tricks. Calls, travel, tests, sanctions, hunches, everything comes to me first," Jack said, no-nonsense, "understood?"

The need to say more than what he did was almost irresistible, but somehow Will managed to say "...Understood."

He returned his eyes to the city. Somewhere beyond the skyline, Will could feel the eyes of the hunter fixed and waiting. He remembered the feel upon his skin, of someone watching that he could not fully see, *the rest waiting inside his head.*

He closed his own eyes.

Eleanor's smiling face hid behind his eyelids. Will smiled in return, and imagined he could feel her in his arms. The fantasy did nothing to curb the festering inside.

The room was large and high-ceilinged, draped in fashionable tones of grey, mixed with unobtrusive teal and Eton blue. The wallpaper was festooned with curls in a disconcerting cream upon white, complete with flecks gilt in gold. The front door had opened into a relaxing huddle of white armchairs and sofa, clustered around a low glass coffee table sporting a bowl of fruit, freshly stocked. Behind sat an elegant writing desk silhouetted against the overly opulent quarter-fan arched windows, beyond which he could see the terrace. When he looked out he found himself looking down onto the Museums Quartier, the trailing beauty of Ostooandell and the Miroslav Čech. Trailing his eyes up to the ceiling opened a feast of angels in frolic, horses with riders fallen, swords and blood and ravaging conquerors; the bohemian palace of the renaissance masters. The Palais Coburg seemed to skimp on little, except perhaps excess. They had a lot of that, Will was finding out.

He walked slowly back into the room, placing his coat over the back of an armchair. Complete and utter boasting, he knew it was, even if Hannibal would never dream of admitting such a thing. Their honeymoon had originally been set for Lake Tahoe, restricted by Will's tight package of days he could scrounge from work. After sorting someone to look after the dogs, getting the house locked up, making sure his caseload was taken care of at work, chasing up any late runners in the labs, packing, booking flights and general stress, Will had been ready to sit down for a few hours on the plane and sleep. Then, to compound his latent anxiety, they'd turned up at the airport and Hannibal had led him towards the international flights.

"Are we going the long way round?" Will had asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No," Hannibal had replied while handing him his boarding pass, a humour glinting in his eyes which only showed itself when mischief was afoot, "I do believe it is necessary to take an international flight to Vienna. Unless you know of a different route?"

Speechless would have probably been what Hannibal would have preferred. Instead Will, already anxious and worn thin by his most recent caseload, had told him, in depth, exactly why they were not going to Europe. Once he was done he had remembered where he was and had shut his lips to a tight line.

"Utterly beautiful," Hannibal had smiled fully, reaching up to tuck a neatly trimmed curl of hair back behind Will's ear, "if you had simply said yes it would have been predictable."

"You'll never let me see all of you," Will had said, surprised by his own sincerity, "not really."

"Then I would be dull. And where would be the fun in that?"

And now, Hannibal had made good on his promise. It was almost surreal. Almost. There was a dream-like quality in the air, as if he would wake up at any moment. Will looked to his left. A set of three stairs led to an open arch in the wall, beyond which he could see the corner of a four poster bed decked in subtle green. To the right he watched Hannibal open a closed door, revealing an extravaganza of cream and gold over sinks and taps and shower heads. Enough to make Will smile and frown, shaking his head. The action caught Hannibal's eye.

“You disapprove?”

“I think,” he said, unable to hide the authenticity in his smile, “you’ve done this on purpose.”

“Ah. Very droll. You will become accustomed to luxury. I have.”

“Mmm, I’m not so sure. Think you’ll just have to put up with me finding the idea of gold taps hilarious. Are we going down for a drink first?”

“If you’d like. Or we could order room service?”

He picked up his coat and hung it in the concealed cupboard by the doorway, watching Hannibal’s shoulder’s ease noticeably once the ‘clutter’ was removed from his line of sight. Will watched him closely.

“You know me so well.”

Hannibal held his gaze a few moments longer than was necessary. Will knew he was understood, on numerous levels, and was unable to stop the thrill that it brought. Their newborn bond palpitated like a beating heart, ticking and ticking between them. *Will licked his lips and looked away, finding their luggage by the doorway.*

While Hannibal washed his face Will brought the suitcases to the low-lit bedroom, sitting down on the bed and rubbing at the back of his neck. The weight of the day rested there, in a noticeable knot. He kneaded it awkwardly with his knuckles before giving into the siren call of the incredibly comfortable mattress, laying back with a soft thump and closing his eyes. It was dark behind them, blessedly so. He thought he could still hear the church bells, tolling for him.

...to honour and obey, to love and cherish, to have and to hold...

It seemed like a lifetime ago. Perhaps even a previous life. Will was wondering if it had even happened to him, or more to the point how he had allowed it to happen. It was a blur of flowers, unknown faces, congratulations, champagne, avoiding Hannibal’s relatives, being utterly terrified, regretting ever saying yes and feeling utterly elated when ‘you may now kiss your beloved’ and Hannibal had done so, claiming him before the crowd as if no one was watching. A maddening ritualistic farce, with a stunning truth resting at its core.

They belonged together now.

Two parts of a whole mess.

Will felt his skin itch. It was wrong, only on a subconscious level. The part of him he had trained over the years to resent the very idea of belonging to anyone ever again was not to be tamed. Will wished it would leave him alone for a few moments at least; the last few months spent chasing the spectre of the Chesapeake Ripper had stripped the life right out of him. He’d appreciate it if this holiday would allow him the chance to earn it back.

Will felt the hairs raise on his forearms. When he opened his eyes Hannibal was stood above him, watching him with an analytical eye. His husband stood like a continuation of the frescoed ceiling; a regal figure from a distinguished past. What are you doing here, lying on this bed as if you belong in his world? *Will swallowed and rubbed at his face with a lazy right hand, hiding any trace of anxiety. It was easy enough to do; practice made perfect.*

As Hannibal opened his mouth to speak Will picked up the phone on the bedside table, "I'm calling downstairs. What would you like?"

His interruption had not been missed, "I will trust your judgement."

"Ok, don't do that, please."

"I am sorry?"

"Test me. I don't need that right now."

"You misunderstand."

"No, I don't. Just tell me what you want."

"I would appreciate it if, for an appetiser, you would please stop judging yourself by imagined standards."

"I'm pretty sure they're not imagined, or so your aunt and uncle would remind me every time we meet."

"This may sound redundant, darling, but I do not see you through their eyes. You are to me what you are to yourself. That is how I would have it."

A long slow breath did nothing to loosen the tension in his shoulders. Will felt the bed dip and put the phone back in its receiver. He looked up to find Hannibal sitting down beside him. In the low light his face seemed younger than it was, the lines by his eyes erased by shadow, the cares upon his shoulders hidden in the gloom. When he spoke Will couldn't stop himself staring at Hannibal's mouth, watching as the lips formed words.

"Would you, dearest?"

"Would I what?"

"Change yourself for me?"

"Not in a million years," Will said, eyes glinting.

"That's my boy," Hannibal said softly, smiling as he leaned in.

"Not testing me, huh?" Will murmured, yet he accepted the kiss.

When his mobile rang, gratingly in his trouser pocket, Will was tempted to leave it. Only the habitual action of rushing to answer in case of work had him picking up at all, "Graham,"

he said in a murmur as Hannibal trailed his throat with dusky lips.

"Will, hey," Jack's voice was a knee jerk of reality out of the fantasy he'd been falling into, "how was your flight?"

He had meant to reply, he really had. Only the antipathy of the people he'd found himself in between pulled his mind in two different directions, Hannibal pulling him into the fantasy while Jack Crawford pressed the knife of reality against the bubble and threatened to destroy it*. Jack Crawford's voice against the background of this opulent suite made him feel like the bubble would pop at any second. Hannibal seemed to sense his unease, stopping with his nose pressed against Will's throat.*

"Will?" Jack pressed.

"Uh, fine," he said, clearing his throat as he sat up, "it was fine."

"Not often I hear that about a flight out of BWI. So how's Nevada? Cold as you thought?"

"It's, um, not quite how I pictured it."

Will looked to his right as Hannibal touched his arm and mouthed one word: Jack*. Will nodded. Hannibal stood and moved into the other room without a word. Will could hear him moving around, his voice speaking in low tones to someone, Will guessed on the hotel phone.*

"I'll bet," Jack continued, "The pictures always look better."

"I don't mean to sound rude, Jack, but is there a reason you phoned?"

There was a short pause, "I should have known not to try the small talk angle," Crawford sighed.

"Was a bit of a giveaway, yeah."

"I wanted to soften the blow. There's been another."

"Another..." Will felt his mouth go dry, "from him?"

"Who else?" Jack said wryly, "It's got all the calling cards. Quite a sight really."

Will felt himself slip back into the slot on instinct, "What's missing this time?"

"Heart. She was, well, frozen by the looks of it. Been here for a couple of days it seems. Zeller can't give us an exact time of death, but he thinks she's been dead for quite some time."

"That's new," Will bit at his lips, "he's trying something new. Why? Was she someone special?"

"Not that we can tell, right now she's a Jane Doe. Jimmy's working her through his box of tricks. If not hopefully the press'll get her recognised."

“Do we..?” Will stopped.

He stopped and he swallowed and, after clearing his throat, he closed his eyes. The draw was like a drug in his system, swimming around his nerve endings like a familiar balm. All the stress and the anxiety he had felt from the wedding seemed to fade into a familiar fume of excitement. It made him ill to realise it. You can’t keep holding onto the anchor as it pulls you to the bottom, he told himself. Everything has to have its limit.

It was with a sort of hazy amazement that he realised he was being forced to choose. Or, perhaps, that he had a choice at all.

“So I have flight times. You can be back in Baltimore by midnight and we can start fresh first thing.”

“...I can’t.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Jack sounded far from sorry.

“I can’t. I...we’re not in Nevada.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Vienna. Hannibal took us to Vienna.”

“Christ. Well that’s going to add to the runtime.”

“I’m not coming back for this.”

“Will, I don’t remember the part where I gave you a choice.”

“And I don’t remember the part where I gave you all of my choices and let you pick the one you liked best,” Will replied, hearing the subtle shake in his voice, carrying on before Crawford could speak, “I need...I need some time away from this Jack. I can’t keep going one after the other after...I’ll burn out. You know I will. I need this.”

“Put Hannibal on the phone,” Jack said stoutly.

“Like hell,” Will bristled, “and if you think-dammit I know what you think but I’ve made my decision. Fire me if you don’t like it. I’ll be back in a week. If you catch the Ripper before then,” he could hear the facetious venom in his voice, “let me know.”

The phone wasn’t simply put down, but turned off completely. Will sat on the bed and bit at the inside of his lip until it hurt. He’d known what Jack wanted: to speak to his alpha. To speak to his own equal. Prejudice was a thing that floated around at work, but never seemed to fully solidify or show itself long enough to be dealt with. Now that Hannibal was in the picture, Jack seemed glad to have a reason to get it out in the open.

A woman is dead, his conscience tried to remind him. I know, Will thought, I know she is. I know. But I don’t want to follow her, if I have the chance to save myself. You won’t do anyone any good if you crack, he tried to console himself, not again. Not like last time.

When Will walked into the main room he was greeted by Hannibal tipping the bellboy as he left with an empty trolley. The table, which had previously held the fruit bowl, was now adorned with several covered plates and an ice bucket, out of which the top of a bottle of white wine could be seen jutting. Will walked over and lifted the silver domes covering the plates; the first revealed oysters, the second a rainbow selection of sliced fruits and the third one made him shake his head. Sliced filet mignon. Hannibal's favourite.

"You can't stop yourself," Will said as he lifted the wine part way from the bucket and saw the name and the year; he lifted his eyebrows and put it back, "can you."

"Nor can you it seems."

"I turned him down."

"Oh?"

"Alright, maybe 'turned down' is the tame version. I'm not going back, we're *not going back, until we're ready."*

A hand at the back of his neck had Will looking to his husband. Hannibal was watching him with an inscrutable eye. For a moment Will was reminded of the looks he was given as they stood by a scene, corpses freshly laid out in blood and misery. There was a smell to it, a smell left behind by the victims and the perpetrator. As they stood by like witnesses Hannibal always seemed to be tasting the smell for what it was, trying to unravel each individual ingredient, to understand it inside and out.

That same sheen was in his eyes now.

"Trying to pull me apart over there?" Will asked as he picked up a slice of kiwi fruit and bit into it.

"Sometimes I appreciate the enigma you present," Hannibal admitted.

"And here I thought little was a mystery to you," Will admonished; he swallowed the fruit and shivered lightly as Hannibal trailed the hand from the back of his neck down to the small of his back. The weight of expectation sat there with the pressure of sure fingers, "I don't want this to...look, I want to stay. I need to stay."

"I understand."

"Ok."

"How is your waltz?" Hannibal asked incongruously.

"Passable, but it makes me dizzy."

Hannibal leaned in, placing his lips against the shell of Will's ear, "Perhaps that is how I like you."

"Well," Will replied in a murmur, "I suppose I can't deny you the little pleasures."

He laughed as Hannibal took hold of him and spun him towards the bedroom, "Then I must dress you for the occasion. One must look the part if they are to last on the stage."

Section Chief Brian Zeller was sick to the back teeth of watching people screw up for the sake of a little diplomacy. Watching Jack Crawford try and deal with Will Graham was like watching a bull try and corral a dog that was foaming at the mouth. Instead of doing anything about the obvious break in sanity Will was struggling through, Jack just kept throwing his weight and expecting results. Brian was just waiting for the moment when Will sank his teeth in and the whole affair devolved into chaos. Just like it had with Hobbs.

As for himself, he felt stuck on the outside of the ring, watching the animals goad each other. And if he was going to be forced to treat Will like Jack did, as a commodity, then at least he felt he'd be able to get a handle on him. Will wasn't an easy ride, he made you work for your results. Brian was willing to try, if only he could get everything he needed to do it. Right now he felt as if he were trapped in a no win scenario.

They would catch this guy, Will always did, but what would be left of him by the end? Brian dreaded to think.

At that moment he was ferrying a courier's case that was showcasing the extent of what a mistake could cost them. Inside were the wheelchair wheels from Freddie Lounds' last stand. Chicago's labs weren't familiar, but at least the inmates were. At the mass spectrometer he dropped off the paint flecks from Lounds' car where she'd been rammed with Becky Weiss. Beverly Katz got the wheels to share with the others in the section. Jimmy Price got the tape from the chair where the fire hadn't had a chance to crisp it beyond use.

Finally he stopped off at Liza Lake in the hot room. She almost didn't notice him, bent over her gas chromatograph.

He opened with, "Tell me we've got something we can use," as he handed over the evidence.

"This from Freddie?"

"There's nothing else right now."

Watching her check the condition of the cans and the seal of the lids was meticulously calming. One contained ashes from the wheelchair, the other charred material from Lounds. Zeller enjoyed procedure and diligence; Liza had both in spades.

"How long has it been in the cans?"

"Eight hours at least. There've been some complications. Don't ask."

"Ok," Liza didn't ask, "I'll headspace it."

She pierced the lid with a heavy-duty syringe, extracted air that had been confined with the ashes and injected the air directly into the chromatograph. After some minute adjustments the

sample began to move along the machine's five hundred foot column, the stylus juggling on the wide graph paper.

"Unleaded," Liza said as she read the readouts like most people read ingredients in a recipe, "It's gasohol, unleaded gasohol. Don't see much of that," she flipped quickly through a loose-leaf file of sample graphs, "I can't give you a brand yet. Let me do it with pentane and I'll get back to you."

"Good," Zeller replied, feeling marginally as if he'd accomplished something that would make a difference, "beep me first thing with the results."

By 5 p.m. Zeller had all he could get and Jack Crawford and Will Graham were back in the building after the funeral. Zeller had caught a vague glimpse of Will before he'd disappeared towards the projector suite, trailed by Starling, and Brian had been forced to take this rare chance to catch Crawford alone.

It had started as a relaying of information, Jack informed him that Will had found there were items missing from the Jacobi's house when compared to their lawyer's lists. A projector and some digitised films. The only ones they had of the Jacobi's so far were holiday movies. It seemed their lawyer, Byron Metcalf, was to check out their son, Niles Jacobi. Will had said the boy had been a real space cadet when he'd visited. He hoped the kid hadn't sold the stuff off.

Yet, as soon as they'd started talking about Will Graham, things had quickly devolved into this particular argument.

"That's crap, Jack, and you know it."

"Excuse me?" Jack said in a disbelieving tone, "You know Zeller, after all the shit I've been through I've had it just about up to here with people sassing me today. If you want to join the line, maybe take a damn ticket."

He'd steered them into an unused boardroom and shut the door, because he wasn't that keen to lose his job just yet. The lights were overly bright against the cream walls and the air seemed stale with the smell of office furniture and hot weather.

"I'm not blind, even if you'd probably rather I was. What is this, Jack? Is he just there for you to throw on the tracks and see if he gnaws his way out of the ropes before the train comes? Graham is on the edge and he's doing no one any good while he's there."

"He can handle it. You've seen him handle it. He's handling it on his own, you know he won't let us help him any other way. And what's got you..?"

"You don't come between an omega and their pup," Zeller interrupted. *There, I said it,* was all he could think, even as Jack stared at him, "it's fucking with him in more ways than one. Don't they teach alphas that shit at school?"

"Yeah well it's mal practice to split up newly mated pairs as well, Brian," Jack replied, quietly intense, "but we did it anyway."

“Not exactly much we could do about it at the time,” Zeller shook his head, “I mean what were we going to do? Put Will in the cell with him? Come on, you’re being contentious.”

“I’m being practical,” Jack said, making Brian sigh through his nose and look away, hands on hips, “Will is our only chance at getting close to our guy, because our guy is getting close to Will. End of.”

“Must be nice to live in such a black and white world.”

“Yeah, it is. Takes out all the troublesome grey areas.”

“He’s...”

And there it was, he couldn’t finish. He couldn’t finish the sentence. The words tilted precariously on the back of his tongue, desperate to fall, and yet they never did. *He’s been vomiting blood in the men’s toilets for the last two days*. For all his raging and his righteous anger, he couldn’t say it. In that moment Zeller knew he was the pot and Jack was the kettle and they were both just as black as each other.

‘Come on Brian,” Will had said to him facetiously as he stood by the sinks and wiped blood from his chin as if everything were perfectly fine, *“don’t let your conscience get the better of you now.”*

Zeller was beginning to wonder what his conscience was supposed to be warning him of in the first place.

“Bev’s the only one he’ll talk to. She said he won’t even go and see his daughter because he’s worried he’ll lead this maniac right to her,” Brian said in the end, *and heaven help me for keeping my mouth shut*, “it’s tearing him apart and there’ll be no one left to pick up the pieces.”

“Do we look like we have a choice?”

“That’s what we said last time.”

Zeller knew he was treading the knife’s edge when he brought up the botched capture of Hannibal Lecter. The fallout from Will’s injury and subsequent mental and physical breakdown had been a bone of contention in their group for years. The blame game, it seemed, was still in full swing.

“Going to pull out that old chestnut, are you?” Jack asked stoutly.

“We fucked him over for an easy arrest,” Zeller said, “and you can’t get over that. Or at least that’s what I thought, till you started doing the same old shit again.”

“You want to bait me some more, Brian? I don’t think I’ve got enough of a reason to make this interesting yet.”

“I just don’t like seeing history repeat itself,” Brian heard the door handle turning, “come on Jack, be reasonable.”

Starling poked her head around the door. Zeller wondered if she could feel the animosity in the room the way he could feel it. She was a difficult one to read. Zeller disliked the masks she wore for different people, but then couldn't bring himself to be that much of a hypocrite to voice it aloud.

"What is it?" Jack asked her when she didn't speak straight away.

"We've got a package," she said, "addressed to Will Graham. It just came in. Three guesses who from."

The seat was hard against his back, and the room was noisy in the way only a hospital waiting room could be. The people didn't make much noise, further than the rustle of paper as book pages were turned or subtle and awkward coughs were grunted out. No, it was the rumble of the hive-like building all around him, and the constancy of rubber soles on squeaking floors, trundling wheels and the beeps of multitudinous lifelines ticking away.

Oddly enough the working television, the only reason he'd dragged himself from his bed, was the one silent thing in the place, as the subtitles roved along the bottom in a screed of multicoloured text. His loose bed robe hid the fact that he was starting to show, his belly swollen to a telling bump of two months growth. Will sometimes found it difficult to look at, for a host of different reasons. He purposefully kept the robe loosely tied over his hospital issue shirt and trousers.

By the time Alana found him Will knew he was staring at the television blankly.

"You had the nurses worried again," she said; Will could hear the unsubtle subtext of her own worry in the words, "can't you just mention to someone when you're going for a stroll?"

He thought he should make a quip. Something sharp but just short of cutting. Something he would have been expected to say. Instead Will stayed silent and continued to watch the screed on the screen. Alana bowed her head a little and sighed before sitting down next to him on one of the uncomfortable, plastic chairs which did nothing for the constant pain of his shoulder wound. The waiting room continued to buzz with infectious tedium.

"I think it should be on the six o'clock news," she said as she checked her watch, "hell. Didn't realise it'd gotten that late."

Will felt his eyes blur from over-focussing. He blinked rapidly and tried to think of something else. It was a pointless venture. All he could think of, whenever he thought of the upcoming trial, were the scrolls of moments that sat like gargoyles, crouched on the corners of his past. The corners that zigged and zagged around his smooth life. The cutting points that had been mysteries to him at the time, and were now spotlighted for his convenience.

His life with Hannibal Lecter had seemed like a dream that he was being forced to wake from, everyone around desperate to take hold of him and force him to admit it for the nightmare it had been. Only...it hadn't. It hadn't been a nightmare. This, this *was the*

nightmare. Until five days ago the doctors told him he'd been on the verge of slipping into a coma he'd probably never have awakened from. His skin crawled and his stomach rolled with constant nausea. His shoulder locked up in pain when he moved the wrong way. It had apparently been a 'damn miracle' he hadn't suffered a miscarriage.

All he could think of was what his body commanded him to. That he'd never been happier than when he was...

"...but I guess that would mean..." Alana was saying when he tuned back into reality.

"Have you seen him?"

She looked at him in surprise. Will wondered if he sounded odd. He was beyond the capability of rationalising himself anymore.

"Seen...Hannibal?" she offered carefully; when Will nodded she licked her lips and folded her arms, "yes. A week ago. Jack asked if I could do the psychological examination for the FBI profile before the trial starts..."

"How is he?" Will interrupted again, "They won't let me see him."

"He's..." she hesitated. She'd been doing that a lot with him recently. He was beginning to think everyone was expecting him to keel over at the slightest application of pressure. Will could tell she didn't want to upset him, but seemed instinctually appalled that he had even asked after his husband's welfare, "he's fine, considering. Calm even. When I asked him about whether he had ever considered himself to be in a disassociated mental state he managed to steer the conversation around to my holiday plans. He's...Hannibal," she said as if that was enough.

And in a way it was. Will knew what she meant, because now 'Hannibal' wasn't Hannibal anymore. He was the Chesapeake Ripper. He was the monster in the person suit who'd been playing house for the last two years while Will fell asleep in his bed and made him lunch and felt alive in his presence more than he had with any other.

"Do you think they'd let me?" Will asked after a moment of hospital silence, "Maybe if you pushed for it they'd let me."

"I don't think that's going to happen."

"I just want to..." Will stopped, closing his eyes. He took a breath, "I just want to see him."

"Will, the trial hasn't even started. We don't even know for sure yet what's going to happen."

"Yeah," he said as he shook his head, "yeah I do. I do. It's just a formality now. I...really miss him."

The non-silence descended. Will coughed, wincing at the choke in it, the rough, wet sound. His stomach hurt. On instinct he curled his arms around himself.

"You..." judge me, don't you*, is what he wanted to say. But he couldn't. Because right now Alana Bloom was the only one capable of being with him in this limbo, and if he lost that he wasn't sure what he'd do. So instead, he said, "you know it's funny. Children, they don't blame the people that hurt them. Adults do. Adults like blame. It makes things nice and easy to deal with. Children are...more complicated in a simple way."*

"Don't start with this again, Will. You can't put all your hopes on something like that. It's not fair."

"Do you think she'll blame me, when she's older? For not telling her about her father?"

"Will, please, I just wanted to come see that you were ok. I think I've had enough of Hannibal Lecter to last me a lifetime in the past few weeks."

"Lucky you," Will smirked, eyes cold.

"I didn't mean..."

"Why didn't I know? Huh?" he asked, as he always did, "Why couldn't I see it?"

"Because you're not a super hero, Will, for crying out loud you're just human like the rest of us."

"No," he shook his head, smiling weakly, "no, that's not it. I wish it was that. I wish I had something to exonerate me. Couldn't I just have been the blind leading the blind? Would have made life a whole hell of a lot easier. I think...I think I knew."

"Please," she said with the hurt frustration only a friend could offer, "I can't listen to this."

"I loved him. Love him," he said as he looked up at the television. It was difficult to say the words, "I'm so lost in this. Alana," he felt his voice fall to a hushed murmur, "I would have gone with him...you know I would have, if he'd asked."

"Jesus," Alana was shaking her head, "you're..." her phone rang, silent but vibrating in her pocket, "dammit. I shouldn't even have this on in here. Hang on, I need to take this."

That had been three hours before anyone had told him of Hannibal's short lived escape, and even then the information hadn't been given freely. He'd had to coerce it out of one of the FBI agents sent to sit outside his door on guard. Will had sat on his bed in the darkening room and felt trapped. Alone and trapped. He wondered if it was how Hannibal felt; kept apart from the life he'd lived, as if he were being punished for living it.

Killer. He's a killer. The most prolific killer you've ever hunted. You know the Ripper, probably better than anyone. You know him, his cold, callous nature, his humour, his artfulness, his high tastes, his single-mindedness, his taciturnity. He could have slaughtered you at any moment and it would have been nothing but a momentary pain that he would commit to memory but, ultimately, live with.

Yet if there had been one thing Will had ever been sure of in his profile of the Ripper, it had been the one thing that allowed him to continue in the madness that Alana would come to call

his ‘hateful love’.

His inconsistency with any profile that had ever been put to file. Hannibal was, as Alana said, ‘Hannibal’. Unique in more than just his quirky nature. He was the only killer Will had ever had the unfortunate luck to encounter that was capable of the sort of connection they had shared.

Capable of a love so real it was enough to make him believe it utterly and completely.

Sometimes, back then, he had allowed himself to cling to that.

After Charlotte, Will found it was easier to survive if he blamed his shattered life on the man who had been forced to leave him with nothing.

Now, he wasn’t sure if he could keep up the charade any longer.

He’d ended up in the Jury room, pacing as the recording played because it made him feel less trapped by the words as they spun in the cassette. The quality was low and sometimes he had to strain to hear it. Even if he wished he wasn’t hearing it at all.

An odd thing to see these days, a cassette tape. Old, out of place, from a time gone by. That's where he saw the Dragon, a man out of his time, living in a past he probably wished he could escape but he never would. It had come in a jiffy bag, the handwriting a match to the envelope of the letter sent to Lecter. *Blue biro, a woman’s handwriting.* Beverly hadn’t had any luck with tracking the Amico products used, but it seemed good old Freddie was leaving them far more than they might need.

The tape stopped and Will walked over to click rewind. It whirred as he heard the door open. When he looked up Beverly Katz stood in the doorway, half in and half out. Will nodded to her and she seemed to make her decision.

“I came to get the tape. The girls in audio want to see if they can get anything from it.”

“Sure,” Will said, “I just need to hear it once more. You...” he hesitated, frowning, “might not want to listen.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m sure I’ve heard it all before.”

Will took her at her word. Still, he thought that no matter how many times you heard something like this, it never lessened in its ability to grab you by the core and squeeze. He clicked the button.

A technician’s monotone started them off: “Case number 426238, item 814, tagged and logged, a tape cassette. This is a recording.”

Then a shift, the quality lowered, the sound became airy and filled with a muffled background haze. Will took hold of the edge of the table and gripped his fingers across the

smooth wood.

Freddie Lounds sounded tired and frightened. Will wished he could have heard this sooner.

“I have had a great privilege,” she was saying, a shake to her voice, “I have seen...I have seen with wonder...wonder and awe...awe...the strength of the Great Red Dragon.”

The original recording had been interrupted frequently as it was made. He could hear the clack of the stop key as it was pushed, and record as it was resumed. Freddie hadn’t made it through in one go. He couldn’t blame her. *Would that have made him mad?* Will wondered, *Did it frustrate you? Stupid bitch couldn’t get it right. Might as well take her lips.*

“I lied about him,” she continued, “All I wrote was lies from Will Graham. He made me write them. I have...I have blasphemed against the Dragon. Even so...the Dragon is merciful. Now I want to serve Him. He...had helped me understand...His splendour and I will praise Him. He...he knows you made me lie, Will Graham. Because I was forced to lie, He will be more...more merciful to me than he will be with you, Will Graham.

“Reach behind you, Will Graham...and feel for the small...knobs on the top of your pelvis. Feel your spine between them...that is the precise spot...where the Dragon will snap your spine.”

Will kept his hands on the desk. *Like hell*, he thought, *like hell I’ll feel*. Instead he wondered if the Dragon knew the nomenclature of the iliac spine; was he ignorant of it or did he just choose not to use it? *They think I’m a fool, but I’ll show them. I can show them with the power the Dragon brings*. The way Lounds spoke of this Dragon, made it sound as if it were a divinity. Will wondered if the Dragon was something higher to their Tooth Fairy than even he could comprehend.

“There’s much...for you to dread,” Freddie was still saying; Will knew what was to come, but it still made him tense, “From...from my own lips you’ll learn a little more to dread...”

Then a small pause. Will gripped the desk as tightly as he could before the awful screaming started. Worse, the blubbering, lipless cry that followed, “You goddanned astard! You romised!”

His hand was shaking badly when he reached out to fumble for the stop button. It took a couple of tries, as if Lounds refused to be silenced. When Will looked up and found Beverly standing beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder, he was surprised. He’d almost forgotten she was even there.

“I know you won’t want to hear this, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“Never said it was.”

“You don’t have to. I remember how long you blamed yourself for Abigail Hobbs. Hell, even Garrett Jacob Hobbs too. It wasn’t something you could have planned for. Just bad timing.”

“Not as bad a time as Freddie had by the sounds of it,” Will said grimly; he hung his head for a moment and blinked away the stars that flashed into his vision when he thought about the tape. He felt his stomach flip over a few times before the burning started. The gastritis was getting worse, “you can take it. The tape. I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Ok,” Beverly squeezed his shoulder before she let go and Will flinched, “also this came for you. It’s been fluoroscoped by the Post Master. I told him I’d bring it up,” The letter she handed him was instantly recognisable from the handwriting on the envelope, “I think, maybe you should get some air.”

“I’ll be alright. I need to phone for Elle. I told her I’d call at lunchtime yesterday but I forgot. I...need to call her.”

Will waited until he was alone to tear it open gently along the top with his keys. The paper was heavy and well folded, the familiar beautiful script inside as anachronistic as it had ever been. Hannibal started,

Dear Will,

It seemed likely that a call would not suffice, nor be possible now that the rat and the bull are in cahoots. (Will assumed the rat to be Chilton, it seemed a fitting term. The bull could be a lot of people, but Will chose Jack)

You appeared upset last we spoke. It seems you have not yet learned to take credit where it is due. Dear Miss Lounds was a masterpiece, but I feel the Dragon (*such a gauche name, is it not?*) *would be rude to take all of the credit. You did so much to expose her insides before he got his chance.*

But it would be difficult and perhaps a little insensitive of me to labour the point. I wish for you to understand that you know where to find me, and that I know where to find you. I wish to help you Will, even if it can only be at your behest. Our time apart has made you as an oasis to a thirsty traveller. My wish to drink is rather overwhelming. Not man nor conscience could keep you from me. Or, of course, my darling daughter.

I hope that, when the time comes, you will remember as I do. The world would be bereft without us.

Yours,

Hannibal

Will folded the letter and put it carefully back into its envelope. The words folded up with it, contained and kept safe like precious little jewels. Will thought he might feel heavy; his arms were slumped and his legs did not wish to stand. He sat, head in his hands, for longer than he could keep track of. The worst thing was knowing he was right. Hannibal was generally right about him. Will had known what he was doing when he put his hand on Freddie's shoulder in the *Tattler* photographs. He wanted to put her at risk, just a little, but he wanted to put himself at risk too. Hannibal knew that. He knew what Will did to himself. He wanted himself as the target because, in the end, at least that exonerated him. Just a little.

Eventually he managed to stand and make his way to the projector room. He stopped off at the toilets on the way. The first two heaves were dry, until all he could hear were Freddie's screams again and again; that had the bile retching up in a stinging vomit. The paper came away red when he wiped. *Need to lay off the spirits, Graham*, he told himself. Not that it would help. The stress was enough to rot him from the inside out.

The darkness of the projector room would have been calming, if he had found it unoccupied. Instead the low level light illuminated the seats, showing Alana Bloom's long, dark hair as a spill over the chair back in the front row. Will didn't have the energy to stand. He walked in and sat down behind her and to the right.

"Someone give away my secret?" Will asked.

"Jack said you'd wind up here eventually," Alana replied, turning in her chair to lean one arm over the headrest; she looked tired, "I came in to listen to the tape."

"Get anything?"

"Nothing I'm sure you haven't already picked up on."

"He's paranoid, he uses religious terminology but this isn't a religious killing in the strict sense, he's more than likely a schizophrenic from the way he had Freddie talk about him."

"Snap," she said, "Now what else have *you* got?"

"He's intelligent but uneducated, he's more than likely from a poor background considering the affluent families he's targeting. Childhood was probably a mess, but he blames the adults. He kills the kids quick, but he takes his time with the parents. Especially the mothers, there's something about his mother. Abandoned perhaps. He's sexually repressed, he's quick to violence, he's probably shy but quick tempered, he might be ashamed of his appearance. Oh yeah, and apparently he wants to snap me in half."

Alana swallowed and looked angry. Will wondered if it was at him or Jack. Probably both.

"Sounds like you've gone right in there," she said.

"Shouldn't I have?"

"I think you're the only one who knows that Will."

"Sounds like you don't like it," he said rubbing at the back of his neck.

"It's not about what I like or don't like."

"Freddie left us a lot of evidence. He got sloppy with her because he was angry. The other crime scenes were clean, almost completely clean. This one has given us a host of particulars. The gasoline he used is unique, the wheelchair anachronistic, the cassette tape reveals him, the blue biro and the woman's handwriting. We'll catch him, Alana."

"I know you will. It's all the stuff you do before you catch him that worries me."

Will wasn't sure what to say to that. Eventually he managed, "I need to go. I need to call Elle."

"Didn't you come to watch the films?"

Will stalled. Alana watched him closely.

"Jack said you've been here every day. You watch them every day."

"I'm just...trying to understand who they were. His victims. Metcalf, he's the Jacobi's lawyer, he found the other discs, their home movies, he's having them shipped to us by courier."

"Every time. Every time you do this. Stop it, Will, please, for me."

"I'm not a fucking masochist, alright? It's my job."

"It's not your job," she said tightly, "you make the decision to take responsibility. These people are dead and there's nothing you can do about that. You need to focus on the now, on what we can do to stop the next one."

"Did you come here to preach?" Will asked as he put the letter down on the seat next to him and rubbed his face with his hands.

He should have known better. Alana was sharp and observant. She caught it before Will had a chance to realise his mistake.

"Been talking with your pen-pal?" she asked dryly.

"Not much I can do to stop him sending me a letter," Will said in his defence.

"You could try not replying."

"When have I ever replied?"

"You think I'm that out of the loop Will?"

"...Jack told you, huh. Look, I'd had a lot to drink, ok? I just needed..."

I just needed to hear his voice. It sounded so pathetic when he tried to say it out loud. He sniffed in a quick breath and let it out long and slow. *Maybe you could start telling the truth*. Will would have laughed, if it hadn't been so dire.

"I'm not going to rationalise it," he said, "there's no time to. I called him and that's that. It's never going to happen again."

"You used to say that about a lot of things."

"When are you going to realise," Will smiled acidly, "that I'm a really good liar, Alana."

"We're all good liars. It's what makes us so interesting to him."

“I’m not interesting to him,” Will shrugged, “it’s worse.”

“Oh?”

“I’m amusing. I’m a...rarity. He likes to think I keep him artfully employed.”

“Hannibal always did like keeping pretty things in cages.”

“And now he’s the pretty thing in the cage. Does that make me the monster, to be the one on the outside?”

“It makes you the survivor, Will,” Alana said seriously; Will swallowed again and looked away, “I hoped you would be able to see that for yourself.”

“To be a survivor you have to have been a victim,” he said slowly, looking towards the big, blank screen before them, “I think that’s what you see yourself as. Because he lied to you.”

“He lied to you too.”

“Are you...happy Alana?”

“What?”

“Happy. Are you happy?”

“Not right now I’m not.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Damn, you really know how to get under my skin, don’t you? Yes, yes I’m happy.”

“Got kids?”

“Not yet. Me and Gareth are thinking about it.”

“Gareth Bates? The attorney from Washington?” Will asked; Alana nodded, “Last time we spoke you didn’t have a good word to say about him. You got married?”

“Nope. We’re just living together. I think you might have put me off marriage.”

Will laughed, low and suspect.

“My marriage was fine, you know. It was everything that came before and after it that screwed me.”

“And as long as you tell yourself that,” Alana said as she stood, looking down at Will with frustrated pity, “then I can’t help you.”

She left him feeling like a shipwreck, with Crawford and Alana and Starling and Zeller and anyone else who wanted a piece all running down the shore to steal his insides for salvage.

Bits here, bites there, hauling and pulling until everything he'd ever regretted was out in the open. As well as everything they wanted him to regret.

They wanted him to regret Hannibal, when all Will could bring himself to do was regret that Hannibal had been caught.

He would have killed you, the old argument gnawed at him, clawed at him, *he wanted to kill you*. Will couldn't say yes or no. Not anymore. Believing Hannibal had wanted him dead had been a simple way to believe he'd always known who the Chesapeake Ripper was, and that he had done the right thing in letting Hannibal go to the Asylum without a fight.

Now he had another killer on his mind, one with a far more direct sense of intimidation than Lecter favoured. The Dragon wanted him dead, and, if he tried hard enough, Will could feel that same hot hate for himself. *He knows you made me lie, Will Graham. He will be more...merciful to me than he will be with you, Will Graham.*

As merciful as I will be with you, Will thought, *when I find you. I wish-I wish I could help you. There's been no-one there to help you, has there? Just hate. You grew up with that hate, and now it's in there. Festering inside. You resent it but you need it, this Great Red Dragon. You wish you could be rid of it but you just can't, because it's all you have left now and you don't know how to live without it. I wish I could help you, but you won't let yourself be helped.*

Will wondered, as he blinked out of his reverie, if he was talking about the Dragon or himself. He chewed at the inside of his lip and picked up the remote control. When he pressed play, the Leeds' sprang into life onscreen. Will watched them and wished the same thing for himself, as he wished for the memories of the Leeds' and the Jacobi's, as he wished for Hannibal, as he wished for his sweet Ellie, and as he wished for the man who suffered under the yolk of the Dragon.

Help us.

The Abyss of Himself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> “Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself.” - *W.B.Yeats*

Crawford, ruffled from his news conference, found Graham at nightfall in the quiet of an unused room on the floor above the U.S. Prosecutor’s office.

Good lights hung low over the green felt of the jury table, where Will had spread out evidence papers and photographs like puzzle pieces ready for the board. He had taken off his jacket and tie and undone his top button, leaving him looking barely awake as he sat half slumped in a chair staring at two photos in particular: The Leeds’ framed picture on his right, the Jacobi’s on his left.

There was no photograph of Lounds. Honestly, Jack wasn’t sure if it was because Will didn’t want to be reminded, or if Will simply didn’t care. Both were bad signs that Jack didn’t want to look at too closely. He didn’t need any more trouble with Graham.

“Looks like a pool room in here,” Jack said as an opener.

“Did you knock ‘em dead?” Will asked as he looked up; he was pale but sober. When he sat back Jack could see a quart of orange juice in his right hand. Will’s eyes never strayed further than Jack’s collar, seeming unable to make it to his face.

“Well,” Jack took the opportunity to collapse in his own chair, “they swallowed what I gave them. Guess that’ll have to do for now. Chicago feels a little safer after I told them your prediction.”

“He won’t hit Chicago,” Will said, as if to solidify his calculations, “he wasn’t here for Chicago. Chicago was just unlucky enough to have Lounds,” Jack watched him take a long swallow of orange; Will blinked his eyes bright and held out the carton, “want some juice?”

“Maybe if it had something stronger in the mix.”

“I’m laying off the hard stuff. Makes me a little crazy.”

“You can say that again.”

“I’d rather not. Any news on the gas?”

“Yeah, the news is Liza Lake is a godsend. Turns out our guy isn’t as smart as he likes to think. He used unleaded gasohol on Freddie, more specifically Servco Supreme. They’re

forty one Servco Supreme franchise stations in greater Chicago. Captain Osbourne's boys swarmed those to check sales given out in containers to someone driving a van or truck. Nothing yet, but they haven't seen all shifts. One hundred and eighty six stations all over eight states in total. We're getting co-operation. If god loves me, he'll have bought it with a credit card. There's a chance."

"Not if he can suck a siphon hose, there isn't."

Jack didn't appreciate Will's lack of enthusiasm, but he also couldn't blame him. Without the drink, Graham appeared to be sobering up to the stark reality that they were still in a bad way. They had evidence, but it was all on a shoe string. Things were getting close now, five days left to the full moon and counting. Their guy was escalating. Jack knew the next one would be something no one would want.

He just hoped to hell he didn't do two in one night.

Talking to Will when he was low was an exercise in control and patience. Feeling hollow and miserable did not dull Will's intuition; instead it seemed to heighten it. The man was quick to point out any flaws in Jack's argument or correct anything he thought Jack might have missed. Jack thought he might be more on the ball now than he ever was when he was happy.

A content Will Graham didn't need to solve himself by solving cases. It was what had made Jack resent Will ever reciprocating Hannibal Lecter's advances. The doctor had picked up Will's cracked life and moulded it back together with a slow and unwavering resilience in the face of Will's resistant nature, and without the neurotic need to save everyone Will had seemed to realise that he might need saving too. Jack had been forced to sit at his desk and read Will's resignation letter, whole passages clearly dictated by Lecter, and curse that damn party where Lecter had laid eyes on Graham.

Even if he knew he should resent Lecter meeting Will for a whole mess of other reasons. But Jack's excellent administrative instincts were not tempered by mercy. No matter how miserable it was to know he was pulling Graham apart all over again, he'd do it a thousand times before he watched another one, or two, or ten, or who knows how many more families wiped from existence. And he knew Graham felt the same. It was what made it bearable.

"You think he's still close," Will said once Jack gave him an opening; they'd been talking city layouts and likely hideouts for the Fairy.

"It makes sense," Jack rebutted, "from the timescale of her injuries. Hell the mouth injuries she had were hours old. Do you think Lounds was unconscious when the Tooth Fairy bit her?"

"No. He'd want her awake to receive the Dragon's blessing," Will said with bitter certainty.

"That's what I figure too. So here's what we've got. The Fairy bumps up Freddie's car and takes her out with a knock on the head – that's in the garage. Then he keeps her quiet with chloroform, they found traces in her throat, does his thing, then brings her back and gets here *hours* after the bite."

“He could have done it all in the back of a van, Jack. Parked out somewhere.”

“You’re forgetting the wool,” Jack argued, “the fibres Bev found in the wheels of the wheelchair. Two kinds, wool and synthetic. I’d say the synthetic could be from the van, but wool? When’d you ever see a wool rug in a van? Or in some place you could rent? No, wool’s from a house.”

“And there was mould,” Will conceded, looking down as if he was speaking to himself; Jack was more than aware Will hadn’t made eye contact with him since he’d arrived. It was like talking to a ghost, “on the wheelchair. Dirt too. Something you might find on equipment kept in a dirt-floored basement, maybe?”

“Right. Now look at this,” Jack pulled out a map, “Freddie was gone a little over fifteen hours by my estimate and her injuries were spread over that time. Figure in Chicago traffic on a Tuesday afternoon, a few hours to work Lounds over wherever he took her and then the time driving back. He couldn’t have gone much more than six hours driving time outside of Chicago,” he pointed to the map, tracing the circle he’d outlined, “this is six hours driving time.

“And we’re looking into all the places you could get a *Tattler* in that time. You said it, this guy’s old fashioned. He’d want a paper copy, not a digital one. He wanted to see Lecter’s reply printed on the page. So far we’ve got a list from the *Tattler* of where their distributors would have got copies on Monday night, ready for our guy to pick up – Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Detroit. That gives us an even more narrowed margin.”

“What if he just *stayed* here. Maybe he broke into somewhere. Maybe he knows someone and they let him use their place. Come on Jack, there’s too many ifs and buts. I thought you didn’t like to make assumptions.”

“I don’t. I’m just spitballing.”

“Right, you’re *assuming*,” Will said; Jack let his lips flatten into a tight line, “Because, regardless of your want believe the opposite, Freddie left us with nothing more than we already know.”

“No. She left us with more than we already knew.”

“Just nothing concrete.”

“I thought you were all hot over the evidence a couple of days ago?”

“Yeah, until I got a good look through it. I hoped, Jack, I really hoped there’d be something there. I’m not beyond hope yet, you know. But there wasn’t. Not a thing. Just ashes and regret. That’s what Freddie left us.”

Jack kept his mouth shut, even as his lips moved against each other with the need to snap out something he was sure he’d regret.

“Look, Lounds was a straight snuff. We made him mad at Lounds,” Will said; Jack could hear the acrimony, the words left unsaid. *I made him mad at Lounds*, he knew Will didn’t want to say, “The only connection to Lounds is one *we* made. There’s little hard evidence to connect them that’ll narrow anything down. Lounds was an annoyance to him, but the Leeds and the Jacobi’s, they’re *what he needs*. I’ve got to know what that connection is Jack. If we’re ever going to catch him, I need to know how he chose them.”

“Alright,” Jack nodded, “look. I said I’d give them a profile. The Chicago PD. They’re mollified, yeah, but they’re still jumpy. Any luck finishing the one I asked you to do?”

“Not yet. I’ll work on it,” Will didn’t look like his mind was on Jack’s words one hundred percent.

“Good, that’s good, get it to me by Tuesday,” Jack wasn’t in the mood for more politics, but he felt he could stretch to a little diplomacy, “How’s the little squirt?”

“Last time I spoke to her? Tired,” Will said as if he sympathised, “and angry at me, with every right.”

“She’ll get over it. She’s still young enough not to care as long as she gets you back.”

“Ah, I’m sure Agent Marquez isn’t thinking that right now. There are tantrums and then there are tantrums. And then there are Eleanor’s tantrums. I think I might be getting off easy.”

“Don’t try and wriggle out of it. You know you’re taking this hard.”

“Not much I can do about that.”

Jack could tell Will’s heart wasn’t in this either. He changed tack again, trying to find the root of the problem. With Will it was always a hunt.

“What’s wrong Will? Something’s got up your ass about this.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Don’t gimme that.”

“I’m not, it’s just...” Will half stood from the chair and reached over to a slim manila folder sitting in a half open cardboard box, opening it to rifle through and pull out a report from the boys in the labs, “this is what they gave me back from the tree.”

“The tree?” Jack asked, taking the report.

“You remember? When I went to Birmingham I found where the Fairy had been sitting. He had a spot in a tree out the back of the gardens in the Jacobi’s street. Carved a symbol into the bark,” Will’s voice darkened, “the majong symbol for the Red Dragon. It didn’t mean anything at the time, but I guess it talks for itself now. Anyway, he’d hacked off a limb from one of the branches so he could get a better view of the garden and Zeller’s guys identified the cut from the branch as these bolt cutters.”

"...And?"

"And it's been in the back of my mind for weeks now," Will said, staring at the felt table and it's plethora of paperwork, "why the hell did he bring bolt cutters when he ended up breaking in through the back door?"

"Maybe it was a precaution. Maybe he didn't know what he'd find so he brought it just in case."

"But he took a glass cutter to the Leeds. The Jacobi's had a glass pane on their door too. Why didn't he do the same? It would have been easier, far easier than what he ended up doing. Hell if he wanted to break in he could have brought a drill and gone through the lock. Anything but bolt cutters Jack. Why the hell did he bring the bolt cutters with him?"

"I don't know Will," Jack was getting to the end of his diplomacy, "but maybe let that simmer in the background while you get along with everything else, ok?"

"Sure," Will sighed, "sure Jack."

"Hey, you want some dinner? It's already eight."

"No, not now. Maybe later. I need to...just think this over a bit more. You go."

"Ok. Call me as soon as anything comes to mind."

On leaving, Crawford looked back at Graham from the gloom of the doorway. He didn't care for what he saw. The hanging lights deepened the hollows in Graham's face as he studied, with the victim's staring at him from the photographs. The room smelled of desperation.

He considered putting Will back out on the street. Letting him go to Birmingham again like he'd asked. Stop him from burning himself out as he sank like a stone through all this savagery. Only he couldn't. Jack didn't have time left for compassion. His instincts told him to leave Graham alone and everything would work out, somehow.

Choosing wine for Hannibal Lecter's table had always been a torturous process. Jack had never researched complementary flavours and wet or dry years more than when he received an invitation to the good doctor's table. This night had become somewhat of a culmination of, what he was now calling, his training.

"Jack," Hannibal smiled welcomingly as he answered the door, "you are the first to arrive," Lecter said as he took Jack's coat and hung it in the atrium, "and the last it appears. I'm afraid plans have been altered. You are to be our only guest."

Jack wouldn't lie and say his heart didn't sink. He'd rather hoped the full night's responsibility of looking pleased for the happy couple wouldn't fall solely to him. He'd remember to send Alana some dead flowers by way of a thank you for dropping him in it.

“Dr. Bloom can’t make it?”

“She has been otherwise engaged. Ah,” Lecter’s eyes glinted as Jack handed him the bottle, “a ‘L’Apparita’. Wonderful choice, Jack. Even I have trouble sourcing Castello di Ami here in Baltimore.”

“Well, it’s a special occasion,” Jack brushed off the implications of his generosity.

“I should get married more often,” Hannibal joked mischievously.

“Speaking of, where is your better half?” Jack thought it only fair to join in the joke, even if personally he didn’t feel it was a funny topic.

“The study,” Hannibal told him, “second floor, beyond the sitting room on the left. Can I leave you to retrieve him while I open this? It should be allowed to breathe.”

“Entrenched himself, has he?” Jack asked.

“Ever since the most recent body was found in the river.”

In a way Jack Crawford found it morbidly reassuring; Will was still Will. The honeymoon debacle had rattled him, he wouldn’t dismiss that. When treated with the necessary care Will Graham was a stalwart and reliable guy, had been ever since Jack had met him. And now there seemed to be trouble from all sides. If it wasn’t Will leaning away from his job, it was jackasses like Hatcher and Conrad being bigoted sons of bitches and pushing Will away from his damn job. It also seemed, from the rumours circulating, that Hatcher wasn’t the only one talking crap about Will, and truthfully Jack had no capacity right now to handle an investigation into the allegations. He just hoped the break Will had taken had allowed him to shake off the cloud he’d walked into ever since he’d slipped into Lecter’s bed.

The study was not a room he was familiar with. Darkly furnished in heavily varnished oak and mahogany, upholstered in forest greens and subtle ochre, books up the walls in tall shelves, low lit; it seemed more of a lair than a room. Somewhere a sophisticated beast would hide in a fairy tale, luring up unsuspecting travellers. Only the trim figure of Will Graham, white shirted and grey suited, leaning against a laden desk on his left hand as he scribbled something down with the right, broke the fantasy.

So absorbed was he in his task that he did not notice Jack at all until he was close enough to see the tan line at his neck.

“Jack,” Will’s identical greeting was so very different from Hannibal’s; surprised and distracted versus relaxed and controlled, “that time already huh?”

"I’ve been sent to fetch you,” Jack said as he looked down at the papers on his desk. Familiar sights set into a new form. Photographs of the recent missing in the Baltimore catchment area whose bodies had washed up or been found by unlucky joggers and dog walkers. He couldn’t help but wave his finger over the line of dead faces, “what is it? Date order?”

"Skin tone order," Will shrugged when Jack raised an eyebrow, "shoot me down if you want. It fits. Don't you think it fits? Look at the subtle shift in shades. No one like the other. Like a make-up counter."

"You're serious."

"Damn right I am. It's a pattern. I don't know what for yet, but patterns don't pop up without motive. Beverly agrees with me."

"Thought you were supposed to be working the newest Ripper victim," Jack couldn't help but sound sharp.

"I have. Nothing more to do now until something new comes up from the lab," Will said, distracted, "but this one's got a lot of potential. You don't want my thoughts?"

"I want the Ripper."

"We all do Jack. One step at a time though, yeah? So this theory I've got..."

"Why do I feel like I'm the last to know?"

"You're the second to know," Will allowed himself a small smile, his eyes trained on Jack's elbow, "Bev called to give me the results for the red fibers stuck in number fifteen's teeth. I bounced the idea off her and she bounced it back. What's funny?"

"Nothing's funny," Jack knew he was smiling, laughing to himself a little, "just good to know you're still in there."

"Can I be out there as well, or am I confined to self-analysis?"

"Oh, you can be as out-there as you like. Just as long as you're out there with us."

"I'll remember not to get married again anytime soon," Will said dryly.

Jack's laugh faded and his smile mellowed along with it. Will's words mirrored his alpha's just a little too closely. As if on cue the door opened a little further and Hannibal entered, carrying a tray with three glasses of white.

"I fear my arbitrator has been swayed to the opposition," Hannibal said as he gave Jack his glass, "dinner should not be kept waiting."

"It's difficult to be off duty," Jack admitted, taking a large sip of wine, "oh, now that's something," he found himself saying, "Any smoother it'd slip back out my mouth."

Will sipped his own and frowned. Jack watched as Will caught Hannibal's eye. A single eyebrow was raised. Hannibal replied by tipping his head to the right and looking down. For Jack the silent exchange was fascinating to witness, from a behavioural point of view. Further than that it just rubbed salt in the wound.

"You opened it," Will wasn't asking, though he sounded suspiciously stunned.

“It appears tonight has become an occasion,” Hannibal seemed utterly amused.

“Now I’m not sure if tonight is an occasion with the wine or because of the wine,” Will said, taking another sip.

“I think I’ve missed something,” Jack interjected cautiously.

“We flew back through Germany,” Will explained as they were led downstairs, “had three hours to kill before the connection. There was time to go shopping and Hannibal treated himself. I understood we were supposed to be saving it, but it seems not.”

“Alright you’ve got me worried. What kind of price tag did I just swallow?”

“Now Jack, it is crass to ask the host how he feeds his guests,” Hannibal said, walking down the stairs ahead of them.

He knew he could rely on Will. When Jack looked to his left Will was awkwardly holding up seven fingers, his glass still in his left hand.

“Seven hundred *dollars?” Jack couldn’t hold back the exclamation.*

“Add a zero,” Will said.

Completely out of his league would have been an understatement, if Jack wasn’t so unreservedly competitive. Being in the bull pen was his home turf. Unfortunately it seemed it was also Hannibal’s. It wasn’t difficult to see when he was being outdone in the unstated competition. Hannibal was a tricky opponent.

“Well, if I’m going to feel like I’ve brought an inadequate gift, I might as well do it drunk on my inadequacy.”

“An aperitif is to be savoured,” Hannibal was saying as they entered the dining room, “St. Diadochos of Photiki wrote a monologue against the practice of drinking before a meal as it did not discipline the sexual organs.”

“The same man who wrote ‘whoever loves himself cannot love god’, if I’m not mistaken,” Will said, to which Hannibal smiled fondly at his spouse, “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Then I think it is fair to say we drink against his teachings, as philosophical rebels,” once they were seated Hannibal lifted his glass, “a toast, for the occasion.”

“To?” Will asked as he moved his fork minutely to the right to keep it in line with his plate.

There was a moment’s silence, in which Hannibal looked at his wine as if it were a co-conspirator, “To fascination, and the places it takes us.”

“Good or bad,” Will added in a murmur.

“I’ll drink to that,” Jack said to be polite.

They all drank, though Jack was sure none of them were thinking of St. Diadochos as they did so. Truthfully he didn't like where fascination led either Hannibal or Will, towards marital bliss and towards the dark places respectively. But if he had to pick he resented the marital bliss more than the other, even if it made him feel like an awful person for even thinking it.

Jack decided, as they ate, that he would have maybe preferred something a little less abstract as a toast, like 'here's to not forcing your boss to contend with other alphas for control'. It was never fun to feel as if there was an interloper in the pack. Especially one he'd invited personally. And one who was able to concoct not only delicious cuisine but subtly barbed conversation which was designed specifically to exert his superiority. Hannibal spent the meal in his element and Jack wished he could either be too drunk to notice or sober enough to fight back.

"You know," Will said when they were once more alone, waiting for Hannibal to return with desert, "I thought we were past niceties, Jack."

"I'm sorry?"

"I've known you for five years. Never seen you keep quiet for so long when something pisses you off this badly."

"Maybe I'm mellowing in my old age."

"And maybe I'd believe that, if I were a moron," Will said, finishing his glass. Will hadn't seemed to discriminate between wines, which had made Jack feel a little less laughable, "am I going to have to watch this pissing contest all night, or do I get a break?"

"I don't think that's up to me anymore."

"Christ, that must've hurt."

"I feel like this is karma," Jack smiled thinly, "I just came to offer my congratulations."

"A peace offering? Which would be why you've both been trying to one up each other since you stepped in the door," Will offered sarcastically, "Or are you just trying to figure me out?"

It was easy to recognise the familiar look; Will knew how he worked. Jack had spent years witnessing the moment when 'Will knew'. It was always a good idea to keep your opinions to yourself and let him say what he wanted to say in those moments. Dealing with Graham was always a social nightmare, considering Will refused to be constrained by society's whims. Or Jack's, for that matter.

"You're not going to ask?" Will looked up over his shoulder at clinking from the kitchen, "Ok, then I get to cross them off the list for you. If you think it was for the status, then you must think I'm pretty shallow. If you think it was for the money then you must think I'm even shallower. If you think it was for the protection then I'll lose all respect for you."

"I wouldn't presume to fully understand your choice, Will."

“Alright,” he smiled, “I can make it easier. You want to know why I married Hannibal? I’ve never known who I am more than when I’m with him,” the bluntness of the answer took Jack off guard, “And he lets me. Let’s me be whatever I need to be. I’ve never had that before, not once. He doesn’t pander, he doesn’t expect, and when he tries to manipulate me at least it’s an enjoyable game. He’s...” Will searched for the words, his eyes wandering across the damask tablecloth, “as utterly singular and compellingly mad as I am. If there are better reasons than those to say yes, then maybe I’m the fool.”

Jack would have said something if Hannibal hadn’t returned with his final course of this torturous night. Or at least he told himself later that he would have.

“A cornucopia,” Jack smiled as Hannibal placed the artful platter in the middle of the table and sat down, sorting his suit jacket, “I should have expected nothing less.”

“Figs,” Hannibal began, detailing the tumble of fruits and such that filtered from the brass horn, “comb honey, dates, pomegranates, dried apricots, almond cake and seasonal fruits. A fitting finale. A last supper, one might say. Old giving way to new.”

“Really Hannibal,” Will shook his head, running his index and middlefingers over his mouth.

Jack waited again, feeling caught on the hop by their interplay; Will knew Hannibal it seemed, while Jack was learning that the man he called friend had somehow become an utter mystery; and a dangerous one at that. The man in question pursed his lips in a twitch-like motion and began fishing for choice fruits from the plate.

“My husband disapproves of my choice.”

“I just hoped we could all sit down as friends,” Will sighed, plucking out a fig and tearing the ripe fruit open with his fingers, “seems I was hoping for too much,” Will addressed Jack as he gestured to the plate, “when he said last supper he was being literal. All this would have been on the table before the apostles.”

“Then it stands to reason that one of us must be chosen for martyrdom,” Jack said.

“And that one of us will take his thirty pieces of silver,” Hannibal rebutted.

“And that one of us will be in the living room until you’re both quite done,” Will said, dropping his split fig to his plate in sudden irritation.

Jack was forced to watch Will stand up and leave them both bereft and feeling a little foolish. Or at least that was how Jack felt. He couldn’t speak for Dr. Lecter, who seemed to be taking Will’s departure in his stride. He was beginning to suspect that none of this had been done for the benefit of impressing Will, but rather fully to put Jack in his place. It seemed Will certainly did know Hannibal better than he did.

He was tempted to go after him, talk this through the old fashioned way. Yet Jack liked to think he was intuitive enough to know when he was beaten. His instincts told him to leave Graham and Lecter alone and everything would work out somehow.

“Truthfully, I am surprised someone has not been here sooner to ask, though I must admit I value your visits, Miss Starling. It’s difficult to be drilled for information by a bad listener. Jack Crawford no longer has the patience, and dear Alana Bloom seems to have gone off the idea entirely, both of Will and myself. Does that leave you to forage out in the forest for truffles?”

Starling didn’t interrupt Lecter’s spiel, even though she did not enjoy the monologue or his comparison of herself to a pig. Lecter did so love his puns, she knew that much from her conversations with him. And games. He loved games. Pull you in and push you away. The man was like riding a rollercoaster. She wondered, briefly, how Will Graham had managed to stand it for almost three years.

“But I appear to be doing a good impression of someone who likes the sound of their own voice,” Lecter smiled softly, “do ask away.”

It appeared, to Clarice, that Dr. Chilton had gone a little trigger happy with punishing Lecter for his indiscretion with Will Graham. Yet, in his stripped down cell, sketches gone from the walls, books from their shelves and even the toilet seat gone from the toilet, Lecter still sat in his chair, perfectly composed. In his small, grey box the man managed to make it seem as if she were a curious student who had come to see her mentor in his study. Honestly, she found it quite impressive, in a sociopathic sort of way.

“Actually I was wondering if you could give me a perspective on Will Graham,” she opened strongly; no point in pussyfooting, Lecter would tear her apart.

“Well that all depends on the perspective,” Lecter’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, “through a magnifying glass for all the petty little details? Through a half open door to learn secrets? Through a hunter’s sights?”

“I was thinking more a scalpel and a bone-saw,” it was always better to play into the doctor’s metaphors. He seemed to appreciate it.

“Ah, then you wish to see inside. Tricky places, insides. Will’s resemble a sponge where others have hearts and brains. He absorbs where others reflect. This work is antithetical for someone of his talents. Though I admit watching him work is rather hypnotic, is it not?”

“He’s...efficient.”

“How egalitarian of you Clarice,” Lecter crossed his legs, “I hope you do not mind me calling you Clarice?” she shook her head, “Only if we are to discuss the most intimate areas then first names seem a little more than just a necessary social nicety.”

There’d been many over the years, but Clarice was reminded of a guy in her second year. The type that couldn’t take a hint. An antsy beta with too much testosterone to keep himself steady. He’d tried every line on her in the book, and he wasn’t the only one. She’d dated Forbes Jackson for four months after graduation until she realised there was nothing there but hope for more. She saw colleagues with partners. She still rebuffed advances acrid enough to

make you wince. None of them had a quarter of the charm Lecter was able to exude on cue. He was quietly powerful, but with a hint of dangerous savagery resting just beneath the skin.

Perhaps it wasn't such a stretch to understand how Will Graham had stood those three years.

"We don't have anything concrete, but Will seems to have a scent."

"Then I suggest you pick up his leash and take off the collar. Will's nose very rarely leads him astray."

"That's proving tricky. He's..." she didn't want to give too much away; talking to Lecter was an exercise in caution, "...having problems."

"I would have found it more surprising if you told me he was not."

"It's not just mental. Seems to be manifesting itself physically. He won't let anyone in to help."

"You entered into a devil's bargain with Jack Crawford, Clarice. He has asked you to use Will for your purposes and you are his keeper. It takes its toll, watching the fallout."

"Jack isn't the devil. Just a slave driver."

"When it comes to how far he is willing to push Will across the chessboard, he is certainly no saint."

She thought of where she wanted the conversation to go. Lecter was always the host and never the guest; he steered the conversation whichever way he wished it. Clarice knew she would have to be compromising.

"Before meeting Will Graham," she said carefully, "I had a framework in my head of who I would encounter. Of the way he is, or thinks he is."

"The way you think of a person isn't always a reliable guide to who they are."

"I was wrong about him. Were you ever wrong about him?"

"I have underestimated him before. I have never been wrong about him. He once told me, in a very brief letter after my incarceration, that he knew who he was, but that he was not so sure who I was any longer," if it had been anyone but Dr. Lecter, Clarice would have assumed he was running his eyes over her on purpose; she thought she knew that look by now. He was seeing something that was there only for him, a memory, "he was scarred then, and resentful of it. I hope he has awoken since to his reality. Our scars have the power to remind us that the past was real."

"I don't think Will wants to remember his past."

"No, he does not. He wishes to live in it."

"Do you?"

“I’d rather make the past my future.”

“Sounds overly optimistic.”

“Only if you have no imagination. Such as your inventive little Pilgrim. He seems to have lots of imagination to spare. Taking the power into his own hands which he has been denied for so long. First he kills the pet, then the family. It seems Freddie Lounds was Will’s pet. The next step is obvious even to someone lacking in foresight.”

“Then it’s fair to assume you don’t care if Will lives or dies.”

“One should never assume, Clarice. It’s unbecoming. And foolish. Especially for one who wishes to believe I am still besotted in love.”

“I wouldn’t care to know what you mean.”

“Oh come now, the stink of romance almost overpowers that delightful perfume you’re wearing. I know you wish to understand me through the veil of my love for Will. It is my one relatable quality, no? Though I know that few could understand our love who were not a part of it.”

Drawn in. She knew she was. It was too difficult to resist the opportunity, “You were building a family with him,” she prodded.

“Family is a crude term. We created life which spawned death. It was not to my plan, but it was to someone else’s it seems. I felt my hand was forced.”

“Then you are disappointed that he was made to hate you?”

“Will doesn’t hate me. He regrets. A life without regret is no life at all. Will is relearning how to be intimate with his instincts,” Lecter sniffed and looked up towards the ceiling, “They have dulled through misuse. The way any animal thinks depends on the limitations of body and mind. If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn of our power. You were limited, were you not, by the integral foster system of this fine country? Still, you may find it yet, as Will has.”

“You want him to suffer in the past he can’t escape,” Clarice felt both disgusted and pained on Will’s behalf, though she didn’t show it, “doesn’t such cruelty go against the grain?”

“That sounds almost ridiculous, considering,” Lecter smiled, “but then cruelty is often misunderstood. There is no need for unnecessary suffering. Human emotions are a gift from our animal ancestors. Cruelty is a gift humanity has given itself.”

“Then you believe you’ve given him a gift?”

“The rarest and most precious. Only he was not ready to receive it.”

“Your madness.”

“Madness can be seen as a medicine for the modern world. Will wishes to cure with his own brand of madness. The barely acceptable kind. To catch these killers he gets into their heads, though doing so opens a two way door. When will you be able to tell, Clarice, if the door has truly closed behind him?”

“Then we’ll get him a therapist.”

“Are you a suitable replacement for therapy, Miss Starling?”

“It seems I might be Will Graham’s.”

A wide and amused smile split Lecter’s face, so much so that Clarice half expected him to laugh, “Not to cause offence, but I very much doubt that. Will’s needs are very specific.”

She felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. Clarice murmured out an ‘excuse me for a moment’ and checked the screen. A text from Jack;

Back here ASAP. Grahams got a bite.

Clarice couldn’t help the spike of excitement the sight caused. It seemed bizarre to her, that she could hear so much of Will Graham that should make her trust him as far as she could throw him, and yet the confidence she had in him had not wavered. It was with a disgusted amazement that she realised Will and Lecter shared that pathology in common; they were identical in the quality of their ease of manipulation and the dependence they inspired.

Fascination was a deadly tool, it seemed.

“Excuse me, that’s all the time I have,” she said as she stood, putting her jacket over her arm, “thank you for seeing me, Dr. Lecter.”

“Anytime, Clarice,” Lecter, ever the gentleman, stood with her, “and do tell dear Will that if he ever needs to find the trail of crumbs to the gingerbread house, he knows where I am.”

She did not hesitate, because it would be too telling a gesture. All she could wonder as she walked the long corridor, was: *does he truly know where the Dragon is?* The need to believe it was true was shocking. Clarice hoped, after her flight back to Chicago when she told Will the message, that he was able to resist it as she was.

Ever since that night, Will Graham had become, once more, unutterably difficult. Well, that morning in particular if Hannibal was to be truthful with himself. The memory of the man’s naked skin beneath his palms, the smooth line of his neck, the unabashed dilation of his pupils, the unmitigated sensuality he had descended into; the pure descent into his true self that Will had provided was enough to have Hannibal lick his lips as they stood in the hotel room while the rain beat down outside.

He had been allowed to devour him. Allowed being an operative word, because Will Graham did not let you take anything for granted. Of course he may have taken it a little far. It had

been a temptation, offered so freely that he could not resist, so that when Will's phone had rung that next morning, Hannibal had answered while Will slept peacefully beside him.

'Dr. Lecter speaking.'

'...Hannibal?' Jack's unsure voice had been utterly priceless, 'have I called the wrong number? I'm looking for Will Graham.'

'Ah, yes. Let me just wake him for you.'

The fallout had been wholly spectacular. Enough to make him only partly regret the act of exposing he and Will's carnality. Graham had left without so much as a thank you, mercifully after dressing himself. A naked man storming from his house would have caused a stir with the neighbours.

And since then he had seen neither hide nor hair of him for three weeks. Enough that Hannibal had begun to, dare he even think it, miss the man.

Until now. And 'now' it seemed they were once more working together, which Hannibal had been surprised Jack had allowed to continue now that he was aware of their intimacies. Professionalism hadn't seemed to be one of Will's strong points and yet he was exercising it here, leaving Hannibal with the only plausible conclusion: that Will was in the market for forgiveness.

Tempting. So very tempting. It was enough to make his oath waver – to always play with his food. Will Graham presented an odd mouthful; bitter, and yet only one bite left you wanting for more. Hannibal knew he was walking a dangerous line. Take too many bites and the meal begins to notice. Hannibal found that he did not wish for Will to notice.

Not quite yet.

"Don't force the square peg through the round hole, Jack, it's the act of a desperate man," Will was arguing, hair plastered to his head and his thick jacket quite drenched from his walk to the crime scene, while Jack Crawford stood beside him dry as a bone. The hotel they stood inside had appeared bright but empty in the night sky as he drove in, like a Christmas tree who'd had its presents stolen. And inside, a man ensconced in a bathtub with his sutures clawed open and his chest inside out.

"It's got all the hallmarks," Jack was arguing, "it's the Ripper all over again. Don't let me catch you dismissing before the horses have even finished the race."

"There is no race," Will refuted, "there's fact and there's fantasy. The fantasy is that you think the Ripper's getting sloppy enough to leave us a farce like this. The fact is that this wasn't the Ripper."

Will had laid out his adamant conclusion after he'd been left to do whatever it was he did alone in the room with the corpse. Hannibal had itched to peek inside. To watch Will descend into the mind of madness, much as he had descended into depravity in his arms all those weeks ago, would surely be the sweetest of treats available. Sadly, it had been denied, as it

had been to them all as they were annexed to the hallway until Will emerged with his unpopular denouement.

"Knife wounds are cuts, not stabs," Brian Zeller, back out in the hallway, sounded as adamant as Jack, "he has expert anatomical knowledge, dissecting skills. Mutilation. Organ removal. Victim's in his clothes, on display. Can I say etcetera or should I go on? Twenty two components in all that are attributable to the same killer."

"Twenty two possible *components," Will clarified.*

"It's the Ripper," Zeller said purposefully.

Seemingly without offence or even looking as he did it, Will closed the door in Zeller's face. The last view Hannibal was afforded was Zeller's complete surprise and Beverly Katz smiling at Will's abrupt boldness before the door snapped shut. Jack didn't even blink, making Hannibal assume this was customary behaviour for Graham. Hannibal decided taking it in his stride would be best.

"Ok, convince me," Jack said with a sigh, "what makes you so sure?"

Will didn't talk straight away. He stood for a moment, as if savouring the air, rubbing his palms together. When he eventually started to talk his words were slow and deliberate.

"Let me give you a comparison. The Ripper left a victim in a church pew using his tongue as a page marker in his bible. This is not that. This is a medical student or a trainee. Someone trying to make an extra buck on a back-alley surgery and it went bad. Actively bad."

Hannibal was finding it difficult to focus purely on Will's analysis now that the younger man had shrugged out of his wet jacket. The collar of his shirt was damp. Hannibal knew, beneath the civil layer of cloth, would be the marks he had left on that pale skin. The animalistic part of him, ruled by his biology, snarled with want to see the fruits of his possession. Hannibal's only outward sign of his reaction was to sniff, pouting and twitching his lips upwards in a familiar motion.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack appeared to be coming to him for support, "your thoughts?"

"I must disappoint you, Jack," he said as he walked carefully forwards and stood at the feet of the cold, dead body in the bathtub, chest cracked open and heart on display, "but I concur with Will's conclusion. Similarities and idiosyncrasies are not the same thing. The man you seek would not leave such a...mess."

"It seems that you and I's semantics of the word mess differ, doctor."

"Ah. Well I hope I am not alone in thinking that the Ripper wishes to produce something artful, not crude. His motive is not accessible through, as the zealous Mr. Zeller states, simple similarities."

"Do you see those cuts?" Will continued, walking up to stand at the head of the bathtub; Hannibal was allowed a moment to enjoy their symmetrical position, both physical and

mental, "Amateurish, hurried. The Ripper doesn't fumble like a freshman on his first date. His hands are steady, and his displays are embellished."

"What if he was interrupted?" Jack argued.

"Then you'd have two bodies instead of one," Will said with a shrug.

Hannibal, just out of their line of sight, closed his eyes and savoured Will's voice. The man was becoming more than just the beautiful little amusement he had taken him for on their first meeting. When he opened them Will was looking vaguely in Jack's direction, though never making eye contact.

"You'll catch the Ripper eventually," he said in placation.

"I want to catch him now," Crawford said, managing to avoid sounding like a spoilt child, "and when I do you won't have a chance to shoot him. Because I'm going to."

"Is it fair to ratchet up the law just to get underneath it, Jack?" Hannibal asked.

"Sometimes," Crawford answered; he took a moment, then, "How do you see the Ripper, Will?"

"In my head when I'm asleep," Will replied.

Craving the idea that they might be alone to pursue that line of the conversation made Hannibal wish there was a door to close on Jack Crawford, much as Will had done to Zeller. Instead Hannibal filed the thought away for later and listened.

"Not quite what I was going for," Jack said tightly.

"You asked," Will shrugged again, "I've already given you a profile."

"I want your opinion."

Will closed his eyes and swallowed softly. Hannibal found himself entranced by the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he did so. When Will turned, there was a brief moment of connection as Will caught and held his gaze. Then it was gone as his eyes moved away. The words that followed seemed all the more poignant for that split few seconds in which they were the only ones in the room who seemed to understand.

Even if Will did not know that yet.

"He's a shape of a person," Will said, staring at no one as he spoke, "he looks normal, but is elegantly obstructed. Less of a person and more someone wearing a person suit."

"That sounds appropriately lonely," Jack sounded like he needed the vindication.

"I'm sure he's entirely appropriate to his friends."

"You think he has friends?"

"You were surprised when you found out I *had friends," Will quirked up the right side of his mouth and tipped his head as he moved back out into the room, "I'm sure you'll be surprised by a few more things before all this is through."*

Hannibal would admit he was very much enjoying himself, listening to their insights, when the door opened to reveal Beverly, a phone in her grip which she held with her hand over the receiver.

"Sheriff's downstairs," she said.

"Great," Jack sighed, "the circus is in town. Will, make sure the coroner gets everything she needs."

"Sure Jack," Will nodded.

Will did the handover and then they stood outside the room and watched as the coroner and the crime scene analysts, including Katz, Price and a rather ruffled Zeller, entered the room to clean up shop. Once everything was taken care of Will stood by the wall rubbing his fingers together; they seemed cold, the skin yellowed and pale. Just up the corridor Hannibal spied a laundry cart stocked with fresh towels. Retrieving one and handing it to Will seemed a viable beginning to test his luck.

Interestingly Will appeared happy to offer no resistance. He took the soft towel in his hands and scrunched his fingers into the fibres.

"Thanks," he said, giving his hair a quick and vigorous rub.

"Next time there is a flood, perhaps you can let me know you are in need of a ferry."

"I was close enough to walk," Will said, putting his wet coat back on with a grimace.

"May I offer you my car for the return trip?"

Will continued to rub carefully at his drying curls. His hair was a delightful, half-dry mess once he was done. Hannibal found amusement in the thought of 'mess', and Jack's debasement of his semantic attachments; a man's mutilated corpse and Will Graham's unruly hair. The pleasure of the irony of Jack's statement buoyed him towards Will's budding reply.

"Where will it be taking me?" Will asked.

"I am sure that is entirely up to you."

"Oh, so now it's my *idea. That's a nice touch," Will said dryly; he looked instinctually towards the door as a clunk sounded from beyond, "and if I wanted you to take me home?"*

"I'd ask if you have anything in for dinner. I believe you too have not yet eaten and, despite tonight's activities, I am famished."

Will's laugh was vindicating. Low and mellow and throaty. The man had a very attractive smile which, when genuine, slid all the way into his eyes. He folded the towel meticulously

while he spoke.

"You know I've been thinking about what I should say to you, but now it seems nothing I thought of fits quite right."

"You do not like to be controlled," Hannibal posited.

"Corralled," Will corrected, "with no way out. Is that what you want to do to me, Dr. Lecter?"

"I prefer an open door policy."

Will shook his head and put the used towel by the door of the crime scene, as if it were laundry to be picked up, "I should have taken my own warning."

"Oh?"

"You're more dangerous than you look."

"Only depending on what you wish to avoid."

"Complications," Will said, "and also a lack of complications."

"Sounds complicated."

"I tend to be. Will that be a problem?"

"A wise man would consider such a thing a bonus."

"Are you a wise man?"

"I think you have answered your own question."

Will's smile reappeared, not truly ever having faded during their tete-a-tete, accompanied by a frown, "Are we flirting?"

"Inappropriately so," Hannibal said in return, his eyes showcasing his mischief.

"Fifteen feet from a grisly murder scene."

"Uncomplicatedly complex enough for your tastes?"

"I'm not sure," Will said as he walked down the hallway, Hannibal following behind, "I guess I'll have to try some more and find out. You're driving."

Hannibal decided that small bites were not enough. Will Graham was a meal to be savoured. He would need time to marinade, and many garnishes before he was ready for consumption.

He could wait. Hannibal had always been good at waiting.

Crawford sat in the back row of the jury box eating red skinned peanuts. Before him Will Graham fussed with the projector and closed the courtroom blinds.

“You’ll have the profile for me later this afternoon?” Jack asked him, “You told me Tuesday. This is Tuesday.”

“I’ll finish it,” Will said, “I just want to watch this first.”

The Jacobi’s film had arrived, neatly packaged and flown in with a short note from Metcalf to say sorry for the delay but Niles Jacobi was a tight little prick with no regard for the lives of others. Will hadn’t cared about Niles Jacobi, and he still didn’t. He picked up the digital disk in its plastic sleeve and put it in the DVD tray, the motor whirring as it slid inside.

“Is Metcalf pressing charges against Niles Jacobi?” Jack asked, his voice echoing slightly in the large room.

“Not for theft,” Will said as he picked up the remote and waited for the thing to load, “he’ll probably inherit anyway, him and Jacobi’s brother. They found hash when they busted him. Don’t know about that. Birmingham DA’s ready to take him down a peg.”

“Good,” was all Jack had to say as the movie screen used to show jurors filmed evidence extended down from the ceiling, “We checked the news-stands where the Tooth Fairy could have gotten the *Tattler* so fast. I’ve had reports back from Cincinnati, Detroit, and a bunch from Chicago. Various weirdos to run down.”

Will ignored him and started the film. The flickering of the cheap video camera made him feel woozy. It reminded him of the projector Hannibal had bought, running old film footage his family had taken when he had graduated from University; the first time. When Will sat down it wasn’t a surprise to find the seat next to him occupied. Hannibal sat quietly, eyes on the screen.

It was a fishing movie. Will had to actively stop himself from speaking to the absent man in the room, lest the other actually present became suspicious. Instead he watched as the Jacobi children hunkered down on the bank of a pond with cane poles and cork flies. Will took a deep breath and sighed, trying not think about them in their small boxes six feet under the earth.

You are afraid, Hannibal said, *but you are not a coward, Will. It is your burden to bear. If only you would let me bear it with you.*

“Shh,” he said quietly.

Jack crackled his peanut packet, “What’d you say?”

“Nothing,” Will swallowed.

“Indianapolis is dragging its heels on questioning newsies and checking the Servco Supreme stations.”

“Do you want to watch this, or what?” Will bit out.

Jack quietened down again. Will thought he saw Hannibal smile out the corner of his eye. It gentled him somewhat. Will enjoyed the silence until the end of his the two minute film, then Jack spoke up once more.

“Great, she caught a perch. Now this profile...”

“Jack, you were in Birmingham right after it happened. I didn’t get there for a month. You saw the house while it was still their house, I didn’t. It was stripped and remodelled when I got there. Now for Christ’s sakes let me look at these people. Then I’ll finish your damn profile.”

He started the second film without any further interruptions. A birthday party appeared onscreen. The Jacobis were seated around the end of a table with the cake in front of the youngest, Donald. The candles reflected in his glasses. Around the corners of the table, his brother and sister were side by side watching him blow out the candles.

Will saw Eleanor’s last birthday in the scene. She had friends in place of siblings, and Milo had been there to make sure everyone was spoken to and taken care of and things ran as normally as possible in a way Will wouldn’t have been capable of. The need to reach out and take Hannibal’s hand just to feel that it was real was suddenly overwhelming. He had to stop himself from finding out it was all just the fantasy he’d made for himself. It would be too damning. He was alone, so god damned alone here, and so was Elle where she was. And so was Hannibal, he admitted, even if it stung. They were all alone.

He shifted in his seat as he watched Mrs. Jacobi lean over, her dark hair swinging, to catch the cat and dump it off the table. Now a large envelope was produced, from which came a huge card with a trailing red line and the message – *follow the ribbon*. The bouncing progress as the camera followed, through a door fastened with a hook, down the basement stairs into the basement where Donald was jumping for joy with his hands on the handlebars of a ten-speed bicycle.

Why didn’t they give him the bike outdoors? he wondered.

Mr. Jacobi was a city boy, Hannibal reminded him, *he would have brought his city sensibilities with him to the countryside. Bikes to be kept inside when not supervised.*

“Good point,” Will muttered.

“Mmm?” Jack asked, quick on the draw once more.

“Nothing,” Will said again, absently.

A jumpy cut to the next scene. Outdoors now, with Mr. Jacobi bringing the bike out from the outside basement door. It was the first view of him Will had ever seen, considering he was behind the camera in all the other films. A breeze lifted the hair combed across his bald spot. He set the bicycle ceremoniously on the ground and Donald ran up, ready for his first ride. The film ended with his cautious and wobbling attempt.

Will wondered if he would feel the same pride when Elle was old enough to take her first steps towards independence. He hadn't even been able to stand it when she was ready to go through the Dynamics test.

Losing her already, aren't you, Hannibal said, *Or are you letting her go to save yourself the pain?*

"Sad damn thing," Jack said before Will could consider the ramifications of Hannibal's question, which was concurrently his *own* question, "but we already knew that."

Something, he thought, there's got to be something here. Will started the birthday film over again. Out the corner of his eye he saw Jack shake his head and open his briefcase to read something by the aid of a penlight.

On screen Mr. Jacobi once more brought the bicycle from the basement. The basement door swung shut behind him. There was a large, shining, new padlock hanging from it. Will's heart skipped a beat. He froze the frame, causing Jack to look up.

"There," Will said, his mind going a mile a minute, "there Jack. That's what he wanted them for."

"Wanted what for?"

"The bolt cutters. To cut the padlock and go in through the basement. Only he didn't, in the end. Why didn't he go in that way? Why make it difficult on himself and go in through the back door? I know he had a bolt-cutter. He used it to trim the branch when he was waiting, watching from the woods. Why didn't he use it to go in through the basement door?"

When Will looked to Jack he was smiling a crocodile's smile, "Because he couldn't."

"Couldn't?" Will frowned, "Did he try? Mark it up? I never even got a chance to see that door – the realtor, Geehan, he put in a steel one with deadbolts before I got there."

"You *assume* Geehan did," Jack qualified, sounding pleased with himself, "because Geehan didn't put it in. Jacobi did. The door was there when they were killed. Jacobi was a Detroit guy, he favoured deadbolts."

"*When* did Jacobi put it in?" Will asked seriously.

"Don't know," Jack said, "must've been after the kid's birthday. You got the autopsy records?"

Will fished about in the dark, by the light of his phone, "April fourteenth, a Monday," Will murmured, "I want to know when he changed the door, Jack."

He watched the dull glow on Jack's visage show his growing realisation, "You think he cased the joint while the old door and padlock were there," Jack said as Will began fiddling with the DVDs, putting in the Leeds again and pressing play.

“He brought a bolt cutter didn’t he?” Will said, blinking rapidly, “How else do you break into a house with a bolt cutter unless there’s a bar or chain or padlock? Jacobi didn’t have any bars or chained gates did he?”

“No,” Jack said slowly as he stood up while in the Leeds movie the sound of a car pulling up played.

“Then he went there expecting the padlock. Bolt cutters are heavy and unwieldy. He was moving in daylight and it was a long hike from where he parked. For all he knew he’d be coming back in one hell of a hurry if something went wrong. He saw that door Jack, but you can’t see that side of the house from the woods. In fact you can’t see that door from any angle because of the garden. You’d have to be right up there. Right up at the house.”

“What’re you looking for Will?” Jack asked carefully.

“This,” Will said quietly as he paused the film on the small grey Scottie dog, frozen as it scampered towards the door to greet Mrs. Leeds.

“The dog?”

“The dog,” Will said while his mind ticked over, *the dog, the bolt cutters*, “he doesn’t wear a collar. There were dozens of dogs in that neighbourhood. The Leeds’ cranky ass neighbour told me that. Said there were two or three just like the Leeds that used to come in his yard. The Tooth fairy killed it, but how’d he know which was theirs?”

“Could be posing as a tradesman to get inside the house?” Jack posited, “Electrics, plumbing, something like that?”

“Metcalf would have their bank statements,” Will said to himself, “if he got in the house he’d be able to plan the layout of the kill. Know his way in and where to go when he got there,” Will continued the film, “he brought a glass cutter for the door, but you can see here that there’s no angle on the glass in the Leeds’ door from the alleyway. You’d have to go inside to find it. The doors don’t line up,” Will showed Jack on the film.

Will could feel his pulse thrumming in his veins, like a predator scenting its prey in the long grass; it didn’t gee him up, but instead made him deadly calm.

“Ok," Jack said, probably noting his mood, "then you want Byron Metcalf busy on bank statements for when?”

“April, May,” Will said as he put the DVD back to the start.

Seeing the Leeds alive preoccupied him. Absently, he told Crawford three numbers for Byron Metcalf. He ran the films again while Crawford used the phone in the jury room.

There was the Leeds’ dog, *no collar but he’d known which one was theirs*. There was Valerie Leeds, tugging at his heart. He had never felt as close to the Jacobis as to the Leeds.

Regret is what makes a life a reality, Will, Hannibal stood beside the projector, half in the darkness, *you no longer see them as nothing but chalk marks on a bloody floor.* He swapped

discs. Here were the Jacobi children, ranged around the table once more, candles flickering on their faces.

For a flash, sudden and instant, Will saw the Jacobi's bedroom – *the small blob of candle wax on the bedside table*. He'd expected it at the Leeds but it had been absent. Then the bloodstains around the corner of the bedroom at the Leeds, *the dead audience, the scene set as if he knew exactly where all the players should go...*

Crawford was coming back, phone in his hand, "Metcalf wants me to ask if..."

"*Don't talk to me!"*

He didn't have time to check if Jack was offended, though Will was sure Jack understood. The film ran on and Will stared at it hard, eyes narrow and bright. His calm deepened. His pulse became a singing wail in his ears.

Will it make it all better, darling?, Hannibal walked towards him, caught in the projector's glow, *If you catch him will it make up for not catching me?*

"Shut up," Will said, unable to stop himself, "just shut up."

Jack said nothing. Will watched as the Jacobi's cat was pulled from the table. The Dragon had known it was their cat. Just like the Leeds' dog. The Leeds' bedroom was in view when Mr. Leeds followed Valerie upstairs while she laughed and tried to cover the camera.

The glass pane on the door.

The padlock on the basement.

Everything the Dragon needed to know was in these films.

The bolt cutters.

The woman's handwriting. *Somewhere they would wear gloves as a matter of course.* The blue biro. *Somewhere that used Amico office supplies, the ones Bev had dug up...*

Will stumbled back to the table in the gloom of the projector light and found the familiar green box the Leeds' DVD had been sent in. Their name and address was on it, *Gateway Film Laboratory, St. Louis, MO., 63102*. His mind retrieved the name and the place and the connections sparked.

Gateway Film Laboratory was supplied by Amico, from Beverly's list.

St. Louis was one of the places the *Tattler* was available on Monday night, the same day it was printed.

"Oh Jesus," Will clamped his hands to the side of his head as if to keep the thought from escaping, "oh Christ. Give me the phone Jack, give me the god damned phone."

It was handed over without question.

“Byron? It’s Graham. Listen, those DVD home movies from the Jacobis you sent, were they in any containers? Sure, sure I know you would have sent them along. Ok, I need help bad on something. Do you have their bank statements there? Ok, I need to know where they got the film digitised. Probably a store sent it off for them. If there’re any transactions at camera stores or pharmacies? It’s urgent, Byron. Really damn urgent,” a short pause while he looked up his records and Will became overly aware of the sweat forming on his skin, “you have? Right, ok, give me the name. Birmingham F.B.I. will start checking the stores now. If you find *anything* shoot it straight to them, then to us. Will you do that? Great. You’re a god send, Metcalf. A fucking godsend.”

While the Birmingham F.B.I. corresponded with Metcalf, Will sat in the court room and played the Jacobis film over again. Hannibal kept him company, sitting on the table with his long legs reaching the floor. They watched the children sing in silent voices, ‘h-aaaa-py b-iiii-rthday to y-oooou’. For a hideous moment Will wished Elle could have had both her fathers there for her birthday, at the corner of the table. That Elle could have met him, just once. Just once, to let Hannibal feel her in his arms. To see the sum they had made of their whole.

By the time Jack returned, two hours later, Will had come down from the pulse pounding high of knowing they had their guy. He stood, knowing what Jack would say even before the man dispensed with all formalities and clapped Will on both sides of his shoulders, giving him a firm shake. Will nodded his head, even as he wished he could pull away into the firm hold of the man that stood behind him, if only in his head.

“It’s Gateway?” Will asked.

“Graham, you god damned miracle worker,” Jack grinned, “it’s Gateway.”

Chapter End Notes

> The wine Hannibal bought was an Egon Muller-Scharzhof Scharzhofberger Riesling 'Trockenbeerenauslese' (which literally means 'a selection of dried berries') from Germany which goes for £4,577 ($7111.28).

Phoenix

Chapter Notes

> Apologies, this was supposed to be a bigger chapter than it is so that I could have the ending all together in one, but it ended up too unwieldy and too long. So there should be 2 more chapters and perhaps an epilogue afterwards. I hope it will be worth waiting for!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> ‘There is no murder. We make murder, and it matters only to us.”
>
> Red Dragon, *Thomas Harris*

When their anniversary rolled around, Will had been embarrassed that he was the one to forget.

He liked to defend himself with the fact that he’d been submerged in life; between four consecutive appointments for hormone treatments at the clinic, applying for research grants for his new look into the hierarchical scale of insect larva in corpses dependant on environmental and external factors, and putting his own house in Wolf Trap on the market with all that entailed. To make matters worse his therapies had been playing havoc with Hannibal’s, normally utterly reliable, cycles; mood swings were not something he was used to dealing with.

The first sniff of something odd had been his sudden urge to be overly protective of Will. It had become so bad at one point that Hannibal had actively fronted on the postman for making small talk when delivering a parcel. Then suddenly he was exhausted on coming home from work, no matter if it was a regular or backshift. Then the unseasonal rut had started in earnest, and Will had forced Hannibal to take time off work.

Which Will hadn’t realised would maybe compound the problem that he hadn’t realised was even there. Before Hannibal had been too tired to do much else but sleep. Once he and Will were home together for the full twenty four hours, their reciprocal hormones popping off like fireworks at the slightest provocation, things got out of hand; said provocation being anything from inadvertently touching each other to simply walking into a room with the other already in it.

Which had led to arguments. Which had led to isolating themselves. Which had led to not being able to stand being apart. Which had led to doing little else for four straight days but fuck, eat and sleep. Most of the time it had been reasonable. Hannibal always was.

Sometimes it had been unreasonable. The forced nature of the rut had led to a couple of rather surprising encounters.

And an unsavoury one. The livid bruises at Will's wrists could attest to that.

Things had been strained. He wouldn't lie to himself about it. Instead he avoided it because the thought of the fallout ruining the fragile life they were building was almost too much to bear.

"At least one of us had the time to make something of the day," Will said as he wiped his fingers on his napkin and smiled as far as was believable.

Coming home from the clinic, tired and antsy and fed up, to find the house in darkness hadn't helped. At first he'd wanted nothing more than to find Hannibal and curl himself around his mate. Then another part of him had wanted nothing more than to find a small corner, squeeze himself into it and stay there for the rest of the evening. Then he'd imposed his will on the situation and decided neither of those were viable.

Of course it hadn't been difficult to find Hannibal; he only had to use his nose. The dining room had flickered like a hidden chamber, where some secret rite was to be performed. The table was set with candles, frothed with unusual flowers and fruits and delicate origami parcels, multitudinous plates filled with succulent food prepared to within an inch of ambrosia.

Designed for sharing, as they sat together at the corner of the table; Hannibal at the head, Will to his right. Strips of spiced meat, freshly made pita breads, flavoured wild rice strewn through with sugar snap peas and tomatoes from the vine, clams and snails in garlic butter, perfectly cooked scallops with hollandaise and parsley, nuts and jams and cheeses and biscuits; the table was full, and soon Will was too.

He thought the last time he'd been so overwhelmed-ly grateful had been their honeymoon the year before. Even if, through the entire meal, Hannibal had appeared noticeably distracted while Will had tried to ignore the rising stress in the air.

"Stop looking at them," Will ordered.

Chewing on a choice piece of brie topped with loganberry jam, Hannibal blinked once before slowly raising his eyes away from Will's wrists. He sniffed and swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"You've been doing it all night," Will said.

"It is not without penance."

"You didn't mean to," Will wished he wasn't trying to convince himself with the statement.

"Part of me must have," Hannibal said bluntly, sitting back and clasping his hands upon his thigh; once more his eyes slid down to the bruises. They seemed to mist with regret and

curiosity. It was the first they had talked of it since it had happened, and Will wasn't sure if he was relieved or anxious, "although I must wonder as to which part."

"Well now you're just being ridiculous."

"Am I?"

"Hit me."

Hannibal's eyes were quick to find his that time. He swallowed his food and frowned marginally.

"Excuse me?"

"Hit me."

"I do not wish to."

"You did then, without a second thought."

Hannibal stayed quiet.

"Well then," Will said reasonably, taking a long sip of the golden dessert wine Hannibal had brought up from the cellar, "the part that made me this wonderful dinner on our anniversary can't be the part you're looking for, which is a good start. Maybe..."

"Yes?"

"We should talk about it."

"Alright."

"I mean..." and then he was stumped. Put him in a room with a corpse and Will Graham was your man. Ask him to talk about himself, and you weren't going to get very far. Will licked his lips and sighed, "is that something you want?" he asked cautiously, "Sexually?"

"Violence?" Hannibal tipped his head and frowned.

It was Will's turn to stay quiet.There was a thoughtful pause. One of the candles at the end of the table flickered in an unseen draught. Another went out as its wick was submerged in liquid wax.

"It was not violence I wanted," Hannibal explained, "It was...dominance. Though I am not sure if you..."

"Want me to lie and say I don't like it when you get possessive in bed? That's just insulting," Will said with a derisive laugh, "You honestly hadn't noticed?"

"I was unsure if I was simply projecting."

“No, you just didn’t want to think I’d enjoy being possessed, considering how much of a stickler I am about being my own man. The distinction isn’t that simple,” Will said as he fiddled with the corner of his napkin, “and you know it. It’s not about giving you power over me. It’s about trusting you to give me what I need, without turning it into what you need. I trust you, Hannibal.”

“Did you trust me not to hurt you?”

“I...” Will wasn’t sure what to say: yes I thought you’d never go that far; yes I thought you weren’t just like all the other alphas; yes I thought I could depend on you to always know when to stop. *None of them seemed quite right, and the complicated nature of his understanding got in the way.*

“I do not like the thought that I could harm you without compunction,” Hannibal continued as Will stayed quiet, “Our relationship is a fine line between mutual attraction and power plays. My biology wishes for me to have control. My morality wishes to have you beside me as an equal. It is an animal want, to have power over others. I thought that I would be capable of rising above that.”

“Animal nature is human nature, and rising above it is an abstract philosophy that the flesh doesn’t adhere to,” Will said, “In our state I doubt a house fire would have deterred us.”

“And where does that line stop?” Hannibal asked.

It was clear to Will that Hannibal was testing the waters. They seemed to have waded into the shallows and Will hoped that they didn’t sink unexpectedly into anything deep.

“The line between animalism and morality,” Hannibal continued, “something you used to battle against in your work, that you still fight every day.”

“I don’t fight it,” Will shrugged, taking another drink, “I try and understand it.”

“But you always make sure to fall back down on the acceptable side,” Hannibal stated, tipping his head slightly to the right.

The waters churned, threatened. Will wondered if he was putting his head underneath the surface a little too often.

“The only other alternative would be to...” he cleared his throat and frowned, “become what I’m trying to know. There’s no place for that. Not here with us, and not out there with everyone else. It’s safer just to be me.”

“Yet parts of you have wished for the other, have they not? Violence and power.”

The shallows deepened, turned dark. The waves were heavy and cresting. Will licked his lips and sighed harshly. He knew what Hannibal was trying to broach. This was not somewhere he liked to go when the waters were choppy.

“I didn’t want power over Hobbs,” he said bluntly, “I just wanted him dead.”

“And you cannot forgive yourself for that.”

“No,” Will shook his head.

“And of the patients who have died on my operating table? Would you have me suffer under their loss?”

“You were trying to save them,” Will said with a look that told Hannibal he didn’t appreciate the patronising analogy, “sort of a polarised set of events, when you think about it.”

“And if I had wished to let them die?”

“That’s...” the waters were becoming dangerously close to uncharted, “what are you saying?”

“The link between life and death, it is the most desirable of powers to hold in one’s hands. You have experienced it, tasted it, and abused it as you saw fit. Your animalism allowed you to do so, but your morality forces your desires to suffer for their choice.”

“That’s hardly out of the ordinary Hannibal. You want to be part of society, you have to pass it’s test.”

“But you do not follow society’s laws,” Hannibal pointed out, holding Will’s stare, “which is why I ask, again, where does that line stop?”

Will swallowed and looked down at the table. His plate was littered with scraps of bread, small pieces of fat from the meat, shells of nuts and skins of fruit. Detritus left from the choice bits he had taken. Picking and choosing; it always caused scraps to be left in its wake.

“Maybe the line isn’t as straight as you think,” Will said, his eyes narrowing a little, “it’s a flexible thing, not an iron rod in the ground.”

“A litmus test of every second of living?”

“Mmm,” Will shrugged, uncomfortable “I...know that the part of me that killed Hobbs is still there. It will always be there. Always be ready to do the same thing again.”

And it was true. He knew it was, because the reason Hobbs had driven him to the brink was not because of guilt. He had liked it, and that scared him.

“We try our best to temper our nature, but it’s a futile race. We’re all the same, in the end. You want to do the right thing, but sometimes being the one with the control changes the effect. Moves the line.”

When he looked up, Hannibal was watching him with a steady and yet captivated gaze.

“When I killed Hobbs, I felt...powerful,” there was something freeing in telling someone, at least someone*, how close he had felt in that moment to Hobbs. How close it had all come, spiralling towards a blurring of personality and need, “Is that how you feel, when you have someone under your knife?”*

Hannibal smiled, seeming to find something funny in his phrasing that Will couldn't fathom.

"It is not that simple a concept," Hannibal said, crossing his legs, "though power is certainly a factor. The curiosity of 'what if' is more a driving force for my actions. A very human function; we will always consider all of our options, and dismiss those that do not suit us. In that sense, morality is subjective, though society is not. I have never knowingly allowed a patient to die at my hand, but who is to say that my subconscious desires have not wished to know what it would feel like?"

"And this is why you're worried about the bruises."

"You told me to stop," Hannibal was once more utterly serious, "and I did not stop. You trusted me, and I betrayed that."

"But you regret it."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be," Will tipped his head and pressed his lips together until they pursed; because believing that Hannibal didn't care was too much to endure*, "Mitigating circumstances, drugged senses, confused boundaries: perhaps none of those matter."*

Hannibal took a long breath and let it out slowly. He had the look of a man unwilling to believe that someone could be so magnanimous about something so contemptible.

"Maybe I'm willing to accept what you are, to a point. You said yourself that it's a part of you. The same way that killing Hobbs will always be a part of me. But we temper it. Somewhere beneath all that sophisticated training," Will let Hannibal reach up and take his hand in both of his own, cradling it, "you want me to do everything you say without question."

"And somewhere beneath all of your egalitarianism and your obstinacy," Hannibal ran his nose over the sensitive, purpled skin of Will's wrist, "you want to give me everything I wish of you."

"But I trust you not to impose that right."

"And I trust you to never change," Hannibal murmured, kissing his wrist softly.

Will shivered as the kiss became a slightly sloppy suck of flesh. His breath hitched as teeth scraped the sensitive skin. He could feel the slight stickiness of the jam, the wet, hot hopefulness of his pulse against Hannibal's canines. It was decadently erotic. He knew what it was: a test. Will wasn't the only one who didn't like to verbalise his feelings.

The fact that he could find it so was enough for Will to understand that Hannibal had accepted his forgiveness, and that, by proxy, he had forgiven him. Human nature was as oddly malleable, Will thought, as the line which held its boundaries in check.

And the line Hannibal had spoken of was trust.

“Trying to turn me into dessert?” he murmured with a small smile.

“That could be arranged.”

Things were taking too long. Will had walked over to open the window because, even in the late evening, the office was stuffy and his eyes stung from the recycled air. He was tempted to go out and breathe in the last of the sunlight, but the clock on the wall was ticking away their time with the irritating sound of someone tapping their fingers on a tabletop. Leaving the building felt like giving up.

He opened the pill case, always in his pocket, and took two aspirin dry. They were bitter against his tongue and his insides didn’t appreciate it. Still.

He was restive. Uneasy.

This was taking too long.

The Dragon wouldn’t hang around for them. *Bunch of little pigs running in circles as they close in.* Would he go out in a last stand? Death by cop or suicide had been Jack’s predicted end for the Tooth Fairy; Will didn’t think it seemed a fitting end for the Red Dragon.

On the flight out to St. Louis, they’d received a wire to the pilot. Starling took the message. She had been unreadable when she returned to her seat, with the message that the Dragon had been in New York. Assaulted two women in an art gallery but not killed them. Will had been surprised until he’d heard about the true damage: a painting, devoured, eaten, *consumed*.

Blake’s *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun.*

It would have seemed hackneyed to anyone else, as it seemed to Jack if the shake of the man’s head had been any indicator. Will knew it wasn’t. It wasn’t a namesake, not a prank, not a crazy trick. It wasn’t that simple. Will currently had two theories circling for dominance.

That in consuming the Dragon, he had become one with his beast, the driving force within him.

Or he had conquered it.

Hoping for the second wasn’t enough. *Will wanted it to be true, if only to help ease the painful thought that one could overcome the dark parts that drove them. Move the boundaries of human nature back to their acceptable lengths.* As for the act itself, the devouring was typical aggressive behaviour if he was truly conquering his inner demons. Yet if he were becoming one with the Dragon, it could also be viewed as cannibalistic – *to draw power from the body parts consumed.*

Which had led to pushing Jack. And Jack staying as still as a car up off its wheels on bricks. Starling had sensibly stayed well out of the conversation, staring down through the window

at the clouds below. Will managed to find it only mildly disturbing that he was so fervent to contact Lecter.

“And what if I’m right?” Will had asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jack had rebutted sternly, “Lecter isn’t going to know any more than you do.”

“And all this after you brought me out here specifically to get information out of Hannibal,” Will said facetiously.

“Don’t change the issue.”

“Ok, now I *know* you’re just stonewalling me for the sake of it.”

“You’re pushing my buttons, Graham. No goddamn phone calls.”

“I need to speak to him.”

“No, you *don’t*.”

“This isn’t a personal call, Jack.”

“I really don’t think there’s such a thing as an impersonal call between you two.”

It was something he couldn’t deny, and so Will had stopped pushing.

Wanting to contact Hannibal hadn’t been disturbing. What had been was the instant connection which had made him want to reach for the phone in the first place. Memories of the case that had consumed him in return, *the haunting of the Chesapeake Ripper and his otherworldly displays. The want of his subconscious mind to wonder feverishly what it would be like to taste the flesh of one considered your own.*

Four years ago, *Venice.* Hannibal had whisked them away to Italy with an ease that the ‘poor little down home country boy’ in Will found both disgusting and yet utterly captivating in its ease. The memory of the Gugenheim gallery, stuck away behind the bridge with its garish signs and its cold walls. Hannibal had pointed out a particular painting, small and dark and horrifying; Goya’s *Saturn Devouring his Son*. The monstrous, bulging eyes above the mutilated figure clasped in greedy hands, its head already gone, its bloody flesh open to the air, and its arm resting in the gaping mouth ready to be sucked from the bone. There was a feral quality to it, the wild and the uncivilised; qualities, he was sure, Goya would have been able to believe capable of such an unconscionable act.

‘*He’s alone,’* Will had said, noting the darkness that surrounded the figure, no background or other people in sight, *‘that’s where this exists. He wanted to make himself truly alone.’*

‘And yet he is lonely,’ Hannibal had replied, watching the painting with a sense of calm quiet.

It had become one of the many little things that had added up to a bigger picture once the curtain dropped. Will couldn’t understand, even though he wanted to. To get a perspective on

the cannibalistic act – Will couldn't think of anyone better to tell him what he had thought it might mean, what the Dragon was trying to prove.

Later, as they'd arrived at Gateway, Will had managed to get a little bit of perspective on the thought. He wouldn't say it, but he was glad Jack had vetoed the call to Lecter. Discussing the man's happiness to consume human flesh would have maybe made him even crazier than the bourbon did.

But the itch to know still lingered, like a trailing hand at the base of his spine, and above all Will wanted to ask him:

Had he truly been lonely?

Jack was sitting at a nearby desk with Gateway's chief accountant on standby for pointers. Starling had worked as the liaison to the local P.D. Will would hand it to her, she did a great job. Quick, efficient and yet blankly friendly. The cops seemed to appreciate it, even if getting the quick and quiet cooperation of the local St. Louis P.D. had been an interesting experiment in societal norms. The first thing out of Lieutenant Fogel's mouth on meeting Will had been,

"*Christ, how many pills you poppin' in the morning son? You smell like a rancid fat fryer," Fogel turned to Jack, "Shouldn't you be getting this omega out of the line of fire, Agent Crawford?"*

It hadn't been the best of first impressions. Will had spoken his mind, and Starling had been left to mop of the ruffled feathers he left behind. Now Lt. Fogel didn't seem to like him very much. Will didn't care; the feeling was mutual.

Only four employees had been brought in. Further to the accountant helping Jack was the personnel manager, Fisk, his secretary Miss Trillman, and Dandridge the CO from Baeder Chemicals. No phones had been used; instead agents had called at their houses and stated the business privately so as to make sure they didn't use the phone after they'd been given the message. By the time Will and Jack arrived the confused group had been assembled.

Will caught sight of Jack's screen; he was still sifting through the Gateway and Baeder employees, quickly and efficiently. Crawford had organised everything to a T. Will continued to watch as Jack linked up the Gateway database with the Jimmy Price's F.B.I. Identification Section in Washington. He'd always been a marvel at this kind of thing. Will knew it. He knew it, and he believed in it.

It was just taking so damn long.

They had hoped for a quick I.D. from the tooth marks they'd taken from Freddie Lounds. Zeller had made a mould, showing the distinctive mess of canines and molars. No one had recognised them. There would be time to try for more and more employees, more and more sets of eyes, but the longer they stayed the riskier it got.

And time was passing – *tick tock, fuck off clock* – and secrecy couldn't be held onto forever. If someone here knew the perp and managed to warn him off, or even just to gossip at the

Feds turning up at the office...their guy was spooked and gone and this would all be for nothing. The Dragon would be on edge. He'd be watching for anything suspicious and then he'd fly.

The thought had his stomach roiling. Will held his hand to his abdomen, feeling the dip just under his belly where the c-section scar pulled the muscle tightly in. He closed his eyes and, for a short moment, felt physically sick. The other hand went to his mouth and Will could feel the bile at his throat. It took a moment of closing his eyes, relaxing and swallowing before he realised his hands were shaking and he could taste blood at the back of his tongue.

The snake is easy prey until it sees the flash of the mongoose's eye beneath the house. Will looked up and thought he saw Hannibal standing beside him in the reflection of the window. When he turned it was to come face to face with Miss Trillman, a short, blonde haired, harassed looking woman. She was holding two plastic cups in her hands.

"Want some water, honey?" she asked, managing a smile.

Somehow he murmured out a 'thank you'. The water trembled in his hand. He took a sip and put it down, grimacing at the taste.

He looked away, down one of the long corridors lit with red exit signs. *Damn*, he thought, *it feels right here, it feels right.* Yet his hunches alone weren't good enough. They needed something concrete. Jack had asked for the woman from the Brooklyn museum, Miss Harper, to be flown down as soon as she could travel. Probably tomorrow. Crawford had thought she could maybe sit in a surveillance van and watch the employees go in.

Will didn't like it. Not only had the Dragon clearly been wearing a disguise from the reports given from the New York museum's staff, but Will knew that the longer they were here the more likely they would tip this guy off.

Does he know? Does he know I'm coming for him? Will caught the scent of the predator, hanging around through the dark rooms, watching the films develop, *watching Mrs Leeds come home with her casual smile, watching Mrs Jacobi pick up the cat, her dark hair swinging.*

Did you see them in the dark and know it was time for them to meet him? To meet the Dragon like you did?

"Hey, Will?"

When he turned it was to find Jack watching him steadily, while the accountant looked a little disconcerted. How did he look to them? He wondered absently. *Can they see you clearly now?*

"Yeah?" he said, doing his best to work around his own thoughts.

"List's done," Jack said without preamble.

Narrowed down so far and yet still so very many of them; twenty six white male employees between twenty and fifty years old who owned vans. *Which one are you?* Will asked the names neatly stacked on the screen, *what name are you hiding yourself inside?* The secretary printed out the list and handed it around the staff and police.

“DMV’s getting us driver’s licence information,” Jack said as he continued to type, “hair colour might help for the descriptions given at the New York museum.”

“Not if he was wearing a wig,” Starling said without looking;

Will nodded in agreement, still staring at the list in his hand; his other was pressed to his bottom lip.

You work here, watching these people every day. There’s you and then there’s them; the gap is noticeable. You worry, don’t you, about what they think of you? You worry; you assume and think their thoughts for them. Always the worst, that’s what you imagine, isn’t it. That they think you’re ugly, odd, trash. You want to show them they’re wrong. Prove it.

Was there anyone special? Did you see any of them, or did they see you? Any little building connections that you can’t help forming because hell, in the end you’re only human and even the broken ones need someone to care about them.

To understand.

“Will?” Jack sounded tired.

“Yeah?” he said, again not looking up.

“You’re killing me here.”

“I’m thinking,” that gave him time, at least a little; he was glad Jack could be relied on for that, to give him what he needed.

Been a long time, hasn’t it, for someone to let you be what you are?

“Quiet,” he murmured, shaking his head; Hannibal smiled.

My little mongoose, *how I miss you when you’re away.*

“Please, just...” Will closed his eyes and took a breath.

Can you see me yet? The darkness asked. When he opened his eyes the low light seemed sterile. *It’s what you would have seen five days a week, maybe more*. *Always hiding in the dark rooms, watching the films develop. It’s where you wanted to be, because without the light people can’t judge you, the way you’ve always been judged. Is that why she left you? Your mother? Were you born wrong and she didn’t want you? You had to hide because that’s the only way you could ever find what you needed. The only way the Dragon couldn’t have you.*

“Ok,” Will cleared his throat, garnering a little attention; the staff looked alert but wary, the police looked jumpy, and Will couldn’t stand the thought of dealing with them. Still, this wasn’t about him.

Are you sure about that, dearest?

He ignored the jibe that seemed to come from just over his shoulder. When he felt the touch at his arm, for a mad moment he assumed it was all in his head. It came again and Will turned, blinking, to find Starling at his elbow. She watched him calmly. What came next raised his opinion of her once again.

“You see him,” she said, “don’t you.”

“What?” he asked on instinct.

“You see him better than all of us, this guy. Let us see him too Will.”

Jack stayed quiet, though he had clearly heard. Will wasn’t sure what to say. *It had been so long since someone had been able to read him without speaking a word.* No time, he thought, no time. He could sit and work it out and waste time they didn’t have or he could act.

Will chose to act and started talking as his mind saw it, “You’ve got the list,” he said to the staff; they were flagging, tired, and he needed them not to be, “he might be on here. He might not be. But you know this man,” that had their attention.

Will suffered under their stares and continued, “I would say he’s average, only because that’s how he tries to portray himself. He doesn’t come across as shy but he keeps to himself. Quiet. Reserved. He doesn’t like to go out for drinks after work or turn up for team building days, but he’s good about it. Always has a reasonable excuse and you don’t mind. Because he’s a good guy, even if he’s a little bit of an oddball.”

“And you don’t blame him because he’d got his reasons, right? Like he lives alone and he’s a little sensitive about his appearance. Doesn’t like people commenting on it because he’s worried about something. Something...about his face,” and suddenly it slipped and wavered and all Will could think about was if the mirrors, *the mirrors in their eyes*, were to remind him of what he was while he was defiling them, to see himself, *see himself,* that he was an unworthy little piece of shit and *you shouldn’t even have the right to...*

“Will?” Starling’s voice, keeping him grounded.

“Sorry, I was thinking,” he cleared his throat again and shivered; his stomach flipped over, “umm,” he stalled, trying to calm down, *they see you, Graham, they all see you,* “He doesn’t have a temper,” he cleared his throat again, “and he doesn’t fight back if someone has a go at him, even though he’ll be built, powerful. You might not be able to tell because his clothing might not show it but he’s strong. You didn’t expect it. You may have seen him lift heavy things for others with little trouble, and that surprised you. You were a little impressed...”

“I...”

Fisk's secretary seemed surprised at herself that she'd interrupted, drawing the gaze of a few around her. She looked like a deer in the headlights under his gaze. Will stared at her and she blushed, "oh, um, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No," Will said quickly, "go on."

"It's nothing," she shook her head.

"If you can think of anyone fitting this description," Jack said seriously, "I need you to tell us right away."

"Well, I mean, I saw something like that but it's just silly, right? I don't think you could be looking for him."

"*Who*, Miss Trillman?" Jack pressed without sounding angry.

"Mr D. He, well, he's nice. I don't know him very well but he's so polite and always offers me a ride home if I need it."

"Mr D?" Will felt his heart quicken on hearing the name; his eyes were on the list in a second, "is he on our list?"

"Oh, well he wouldn't be," she said, "He's part of the group in the changeover between Gateway and Baeder; he was promoted a month or so back."

"You saw him, Miss Trillman?" Will prodded, though he was aware his voice was slightly feverish, "Saw him help someone here maybe?"

"He, well," she looked embarrassed again, "it was just a little thing but I...well like you said I didn't realise he was so strong. He was helping Reba with her bicycle and it had all the saddle bags and panniers full and, well, he just lifted it with one hand into the back of his van."

"Van?" Will asked, "What colour is his van?"

"Dark brown," she said with certainty, then a little squint of her eyes, "or maybe black."

"Who is Reba?" Jack asked while Will thought he could feel the blood shooting through his veins.

"Reba McLane," Trillman said, "she's blind, works in the dark room. She's lovely, very quiet."

"Blind," Will thought as the pieces slotted together; *because she couldn't see the monster sitting on your skin like everyone else could, and all she could judge you on was the words coming out of your mouth or the things your hands did for her.* But then Will frowned, "wait, she's blind but she has a bicycle?"

"Oh, she only walks it to work if she has a lot to carry. Puts all her things on it and wheels it in. Mr D was giving her a ride home. I think they might be friends."

Could you have friends? Maybe, Will thought, *but the Dragon won't. And I doubt he'd be happy with you having them either.*

"His face," Will asked suddenly, making Trillman blink, "does he have anything visibly deformed?" she shook her head, "Not something you think is all that bad, but he seems to take pains to hide, or even the way he speaks might be different..."

"Oh, well yes, he has trouble with his 'esses'," she said, lifting a finger to point in an obviously habitual gesture, "can't say them right. I guess..." she frowned, "I guess he has a little scar, on his upper lip, but it's barely noticeable."

"He works here in the building?"

"Yes, he's Production Supervisor."

"Where's his office?" Jack asked.

"Down the hall," Trillman said.

Will was already walking before she'd finished. The door was locked but the pass key from maintenance worked. He was the first in, flipping on the light.

The first thing that hit him was the neatness; *extremely neat*. The second was the lack of personal items. He found a shelf full of technical manuals on the wall, an empty and immaculate waste paper basket, and a stapler, a flip diary and lamp on the desk.

"The print we pulled from the Leeds was a left thumb print," Jack reminded him as he watched Will.

"He's right handed," Will said, pointing to the desk; everything was situated on the right, "where would he leave a lefty? Clipboard?"

"On it."

While Jack rifled the desk drawers with gloved hands, Will looked closer at the desk. The diary had something neatly written in tight, controlled ink on today's page. He picked it up to get a closer look

Will stared at it. *Stared at it*. The same mark he had found in the tree outside the Jacobi residence; the mark of the Red Dragon.

“Jack.”

“Yeah?”

Will angled it so Crawford, hunched on the floor, could see it. Jack looked simultaneously stern but triumphant.

“He’s doing it tonight,” Will said, knowing he sounded anxious.

“Then we take him before he does, Will,” Jack said, standing and calling for Lt. Fogel before saying with resolve, “let’s get this son of a bitch.”

Jack Crawford did not like hospitals. He was pretty sure most people didn’t, the smell and the noise and the hoards of the sick and the dying, but he had his own particular aversions.

His sprung from guilt, and continued to hop up and down in his gut every time he watched the automatic doors slide open and he was swamped in that infectious hospital atmosphere. Some of the nurses on the Omega post-natal ward had even started calling him by his first name. That had been another weight to add to the others he was already carrying on his shoulders.

“Hi Jack,” the redheaded nurse he refused to learn the name of smiled at him as he rubbed his hands with the alcohol-based hand wash by the door, “you’re always out of hours, huh?”

“No rest for the wicked,” he said with a friendly smile he didn’t feel, “is it alright to go in and see him?”

“Sure, we’ve already served dinner. Janine is in there with little Elle; they’re working but, who knows, maybe you’ll be a good influence.”

The weight doubled. The only time she ever said that to him was when it had been a ‘bad day’. A bad day was not something he wanted to deal with right now. Only the remorse wouldn’t allow him to turn around and leave.

You put him here*, it reminded.*

“Agent Crawford,” Janine , the pretty but cold eyed blonde, said once he’d knocked and entered; her smile was slightly frozen as she looked over her shoulder at him. Jack knew she didn’t like him. He couldn’t truly blame her. She had taken a liking to Will, and that was really all it took to dislike Jack Crawford these days.

“Hey,” he said quietly; moving into the room opened up his view.

Will was on the bed, as he normally was. His hair was a little damp, as if recently washed, whorls against his neck where the sweat was obvious. Under the thin blankets his still slightly swollen stomach was just noticeable. What struck Jack the most, however, were his eyes. Bright and awake, and yet mistily detached.

In his arms was a small bundle of cloth from which a pair of chubby arms were protruding, waving around to the sound of a gurgling baby. Not once in all his visits had he seen Eleanor cry. She was a little darling, as far as he was concerned, and he knew her father loved her.

Jack had needed to accept his guilt, his reality, and the fact that he would never be able to change what he'd done in order to capture Hannibal Lecter.

If only Will, he thought, could accept that too.

"Jack," Will said once his wandering eyes caught and held his; the man's smile was wide and genuine, "I told him you'd be here soon. Didn't I?"

And there it went, as Will's stare wandered off to the empty space at the left side of the bed and fixed on someone that simply was not there.

"You can't say that," Will let out a tired chuckle before looking back to Jack, "honestly, don't listen to him. I said you'd be late because you were working."

"Right, yeah, I was," Jack said, trying his best to sound normal, "working through..." the last remnants of the Chesapeake Ripper case*, "...a big case at the moment."*

"Wish I could help you out," Will said, still smiling as he lifted Eleanor in his arms and rocked the child, "but I've got my arms full."

"Of course," Jack said.

It was perhaps most difficult because he thought he'd gotten away with it. Most difficult to accept that, in the end, he just didn't want to believe it was his fault and, if nothing came of it, then it wouldn't matter anyway, right? Of course not.

After Hannibal's botched arrest and Will's rapid descent towards death, Jack had considered taking the out his superiors had offered him to cover for his blunder: early retirement, with a decent settlement. Enough to keep the news channels happy and his own conscience at bay.

Then, Will had recovered. It had been slow and torturous and hell if the man didn't seem intent on breaking what little was left of his sanity, but Will had recovered. Just a month ago he'd been well in body and mind and, as far as Jack had been able to tell from the brief few meetings they'd scrounged, the nearing date of the birth had given him something to cling to.

And then it had happened. He had learned of it through the grape vine, from Frederick Chilton on his visit to the Asylum to put Lecter to task about the missing bodies of four of his victims. He remembered being furious at Alana Bloom in that moment, stuck in Chilton's stuffy office as the smug doctor revelled in being the one with the news. Will had lost the baby; even though Eleanor had survived, Jack thought he knew what that would mean.

He could still remembered visiting Will Graham in the Asylum, after the affair with Hobbs. He had been a shadow against the wall, face pale, features drawn, eyes that seemed to be turned inwards, staring into nothingness, unwashed, broken and terrified of himself.

It turned out that even Jack Crawford could surprise himself with how far off his assumptions could be, because this *was so much worse than that had been.*

"You're awful quiet," Will said, smiling through a soft frown, asking as he always did, "been a bad one, huh?"

"Pretty damn bad," Jack nodded, the weight intensifying.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Ok," Will nodded, chewing at his lower lip; he looked up to his left suddenly, "huh? Ask him yourself," then a short laugh that made Jack feel ill to hear it, "for god's sakes. Jack, Hannibal wants to know if you'd like to hold Charlotte."

"I..." Jack frowned and spoke before his brain could catch up with his mouth, "but I thought you called her Eleanor?"

"What?" Will frowned, trying to laugh through his sudden confusion; he flinched as Janine touched his arm, looking away from Jack.

"Will, I need to take your blood pressure hon."

"Oh, ok," Will said, still confused, turning to his left he said, "Hannibal, can you take Eleanor?"

There was a stifled intake of breath from Janine, because she was too far away to stop the inevitable from happening. It had been lucky that Jack had decided to sit so close to the bed. He barely even remembered rushing forwards to catch the fumbling bundle of cloth as Will dropped her into invisible arms. She fell about a foot and Jack didn't think he'd ever held anything so fragile as she hit his arms.

The little baby looked up at him through her wide eyes, a shockingly familiar shade of maroon, opened her mouth and wailed. It was the first and last time he was ever to hear Eleanor Graham cry.

When he looked up Janine had both her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide. Though Will was worse. He had the look of someone who'd had the rug pulled out from under his world.

"Jack..." was all he was able to say, frowning and shaking his head slowly, "No, that's..."

"Will, I need you to listen to me," Jack said over the piercing wail of the child in his arms.

"No," he said again, his eyes widening, "where...where is he?"

"Give her to me," Janine was saying, her eyes noticeably bright with unshed tears as she marched towards him; he thought she must have had a nasty fright. Jack handed Eleanor, still screaming, over to the nurse.

“Hannibal? Jack? Jesus Christ,” Will blinked and his hands went to his head, pushing at odd angles, his hair scrunched in one hard fist. Jack thought he might be seeing it all over again; the moments in which Jack had explained to Will how they’d discovered his husband was the Chesapeake Ripper and he’d been forced to watch the man’s world fall apart, “oh Jesus, Jack. Oh please.”

Guilt was an odd emotion. Back then, walking Will through the investigation and arrest of Hannibal Lecter had been justified. He’d told himself that. Because he believed, totally and completely, that telling him would make a difference. That Will would be able to rationalise it, to see *why Jack had done what he had done. That Will would be able to understand.*

Only Will hadn’t, not truly, and it was then that Jack realised he’d miscalculated once again. Because Will Graham loved Hannibal Lecter, with every fibre of his being, and in tearing him away and turning him into the demon he deserved to be seen as, he had torn parts from Will’s body, raw and mortal; live amputation. And now he was haemorrhaging life from the dripping wounds. The only bandage that seemed able to stop the life slipping right out of him had been this absurd but utterly fragile fantasy.

That Hannibal was not the Ripper, and that his other child was still alive and well. That he still had his family, and was not, as he was now, truly and utterly bereft.

And here Jack was seeing the fallout of when that fantasy shattered, made only worse when Janine turned and left the room.

Will looked as if someone had casually cut a scalpel into his skin and asked if it hurt. Jack was sure he heard Will murmur ‘Eleanor’ before throwing the blankets off. When he tried to climb after the nurse Jack held him back. It felt worse than anything, by god did it. It felt like doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, and Jack didn’t know how much more he could stand of using that excuse. He held Will back like a man with nothing to lose from being the one responsible.

“Where are they taking her? God Jack, please*! Stop, I need to...” Will struggled, all wiry, unpredictable strength, “my baby. She’s my baby. Where...” he choked on a keening sound that bit at Jack’s alpha nature; it was so much more than just instinct when an omega close to him was in distress. It was nigh on unbearable.*

“You took him away from me,” the accusation stung but Jack bore it, “I can’t lose her too, I can’t. Do you want me to beg you?” Will pulled back, half laying, half sitting in front of Jack even as the door to his room opened and a doctor and two orderlies entered, “I’ll get on my fucking knees Jack,” Will was bright eyed and feverish as he tried to make good on his threat, struggling up to a wavering kneel.

Jack stood back against the wall, his face blank, as the doctor moved in and nodded to the orderlies.

“I’m begging you,” Will sobbed, “don’t let them take her,” Jack said nothing as the doctor and the orderlies coaxed Will back into the bed; to Jack it looked like a man being strapped to the electric chair. His voice was weak and husky as he repeated, over and over, “What do I have to do? What do I have to do? What do I have to do?”

Standing in that cramped hospital room, sick to his stomach and wracked with guilt, Jack Crawford had wanted nothing more than to give Will the answers he needed.

Now Jack knew that he'd never had them and probably never would. It was difficult to accept but the only man with Will's answers seemed to be Dr. Lecter, and the thought made Jack sick to his stomach.

It hadn't been what he'd expected. He wondered if anyone but Jack had expected it. *Death by cop or suicide.* Will didn't think it fitted. It hadn't been what Will expected, even if he knew he'd have to deal with it now.

Reba McLane hadn't answered her home phone for the first fifteen minutes of he and Starling's drive out to Francis Dolarhyde's country house. From the moment will knew 'Mr.D' had a friend, he knew she was in trouble. Then the cops had finally got to the scene and the call had come out. *A 10-35*, *Ralph Mandy, thirty eight, white male, gunned down in front of Reba McLane's domicile. House unoccupied. Door unlocked and open.*

"He has her," was all Will had been able to say, "he fucking has her."

Starling didn't naysay him. Will almost wished she would. He didn't want to think about what he'd do to her. He didn't want to think he'd be capable, *even though he knew Dolarhyde was more than capable.* He had to believe this could end well.

The plan had been to get within four hundred yards of the house and wait for the patrol car who'd checked McLane's house and Jack Crawford's caravan of SWAT and ST Louis P.D. who were running a few minutes behind, to join them. Then go in for the raid.

Only the unexpected had happened, and when Will saw the glow in the distance against the sun-setting sky and the rising black snake-like cloud above it, he'd wound down his window. There was smoke on the air. Starling had kept driving, well past the four hundred yard mark, right up the driveway.

It gave them a view he didn't think he'd forget anytime soon. The licking flames, the pluming smoke, the crackling wood. The house was ablaze and Reba McLane was inside. He knew she was. *Might already be dead*. He knew she wasn't. He wouldn't. He couldn't kill her. She was different, she was different for him and he wouldn't kill her. So he threw open the car door and ran, because Will couldn't imagine any more *crisped skin and choking sounds and god Freddie had stank and he couldn't get the smell out of his nose and...*

...and the roaring. By god the noise of it. And the heat. Will didn't think, as he approached the house, that he'd ever felt anything like it in his life. It was hot like an opened oven in your face times by a thousand. It forced his skin tight and his eyes blinking as he ran forwards, slipping on the loose gravel. Then he was close enough to get the smoke and it smarted, and he could hear Starling shouting, her voice drowned by the viciousness of the flames and the pounding in his ears.

And he threw up his arms and ran for the door. Once: nothing but unbelievable heat against his right side and his instincts screaming at him to run. Twice: and he hadn't expected it to give way so quickly. Only it did, and the wood of the frame snapped and Will tumbled inside and *by god*. The smoke was hauled in like a poison, pulled in and puffing out into his lungs and nostrils and eyes and god it *hurt* to choke, and the fire baked and blinded and Will pushed himself forwards because...

"Reba McLane!" he shouted, but it was lost to the din, "Reba!"

...because he wouldn't leave her to die, he couldn't leave her to die because he fucking needed her. You love her, don't you? You love her. Will pushed through the front room with its grandfather clock and its piano to the sound of screaming wood and buckling brick. *Did she cheat you, was that it? Did you kill that Ralph Mandy for trying to take her away?* He kept his jacket sleeve over his mouth but still the smoke sneaked through, choking him as he stumbled forwards, his arm raised to protect his face from the inferno.

His hair was hot, his scalp felt scalded. When he looked up the ceiling was alive with a sea of dancing fire, like water rippling in a rainstorm. Before him he thought he could make out a set of stairs. *Did you need her? But the Dragon won't let you keep what you need. It wants you to need only it and nothing else. You wanted to save her, didn't you, save her from it?*

"Reba! Can you hear me?!"

Only you wouldn't leave her to die. Not like this. Not like this. You couldn't leave her when she needed you the most.

"Please," Will wheezed, "please don't leave her like this."

Then movement. Will turned back to the stairs and blinked. There, in a white top and blue jeans, stood a woman lit by nothing but bright firelight. Her eyes were wild with frantic terror, her face locked into a permanent state of shock. She had her hands held out before her, covered in blood, trying desperately to feel for the walls even as they burned.

He opened his mouth to call out.

Then the roof collapsed.

Will heard it before he saw it, a terrible creaking, cracking, with the sound of *weight* behind it that signalled *fucking move or your dead, move, move, move!* Will jerked forwards, falling to the floor where the super heated wood burned his palms and face. He cried out, pushing up even as he felt wood and rubble against his legs, scalding through his trousers. He crawled and hurried and hauled in lungfuls of dizzying smoke. He coughed and hacked and tried not to panic as he stumbled to his feet. His right ankle felt weak but Will couldn't feel any pain.

"Reba!" Will called as he ran for her, "Reba McLane!"

At first she screamed when he took hold of her, tried to fight him. *God he hurt you. Did he hurt you? He wouldn't hurt you, would he?*

“FBI,” he shouted, pulling her close, “I’m FBI. I’ll get you out. I’m here to get you out.”

“Oh god,” she was saying, over and over, “he’s dead. You have to help me. He’s dead.”

“Hold onto me,” was all Will could manage to say.

But when he turned the roof he’d narrowly escaped created a wall of fire behind him and suddenly the house was unfamiliar and deceptive and Will couldn’t tell, through the blinding light and the stinging smoke, where he had come in. He coughed and held Reba close and tried to make his way to wherever he could see bare ground. Wherever he could see a little less goddamned fire than everywhere else.

The heat was nauseating and disorientating and god the smoke made him senseless. It made him want to get down, cover them both and wait for help. *Help he knew would never come in time*. So he couldn’t, had to push through the panic and the fear and the not-knowing-where-the-hell-or-what-the-fuck-to-do.

“I’ll get us out,” he was saying, eyes frenetically searching for *a way out as the fire crept closer and the brightness became utterly blinding*; when he saw the kitchen he made for it because he thought of water and tiles and load bearing walls, pushing through the flames spewing from a nearby doorway and *Jesus fuck that hurt, god! But you have to keep going, have to find a way out because...*

...couldn’t end up like that, with black claw hands and the split skin smile and the slow, agony of existence on a hospital bed somewhere in the burns unit, dying slowly, or worse being kept alive with machines, blind and dumb and deaf and just breathing in and out and in and out and never seeing his Ellie again and you can’t leave her alone, all alone, Graham, you can’t leave her, you can’t leave her..!

“I’ll get us out.”

It hadn’t been a difficult choice, in the end. The window had been the only weak spot and there was nothing with which to break it that wasn’t already ablaze. So he’d pulled her close and he’d told her to stay with him and he’d managed to move the heavy wooden table that was only now catching the greedy flames, pushing and shoving and weakening by the minute, and he’d helped her up, and fuck if it wasn’t a hard climb, *three and a half feet never seemed such a tall order,* and she was crying and muttering something unintelligible and Will couldn’t think straight and up here, high near the ceiling, the heat was unbearable and his head, *god it wouldn’t stop spinning*, and he needed to get them through, needed to go, do it, move Graham, *move!*

The first impact was hard but brittle, giving way beneath him with intense agony against his neck and face. The second slammed into his back with an explosion of blanketing but numbed pain, sound and cool air and voices and feet getting closer and closer.

Will Graham stared up at the night sky, the stars obscured by the aura of white, to yellow, to orange flame. He could feel Reba McLane atop him, trembling in his arms. He could feel something wet at his neck and blinked.

Hannibal's face was the first to slip into view. He smiled, reached down and brushed his hair from his eyes. Will knew he was crying, his raw throat constricting violently.

"You left me," Will choked, wheezing, "you left me."

"Sleep, dearest," Hannibal said, "and I will be here when you wake."

Will Graham closed his eyes to the sound of Clarice Starling calling, *Will! Will listen to me. Hey, don't you fucking dare! Hurry with those paramedics for god's sake!*

Things slipped away like so much else, and he did not fight it.

"Daddy!"

The darkness behind his eyes wavered and the world wobbled.

"Daddy! Come on!"

The shaking continued and Will Graham groaned. Not an aggravated sound; more unaware, groggy. There was something soft on top of him. When he pushed it moved.

"Wake up!" giggling and shaking, "Wake up!"

And when he pushed up the duvet spilled away, floating from his hands like ashes lifted by a breeze. He looked for her, his little Eleanor*, but she was gone. The bedroom was still.*

Laughter and small feet on the wooden floorboards, coming from beyond the door. Will felt heavy, tired. All around him his room sat, familiar, and yet something didn't feel right. Not quite right, like someone had come into his house and moved around all the furniture.

He moved one foot in front of the other until the view lurched to the hallway. The lights were out. He flicked the switch but nothing happened.

"Eleanor?" his voice was small and quiet, seeming to hit the air and stop dead.

He didn't want to go down there. He couldn't place it but the shadows scared him. There was no sound. Muted, silent, hazy. The dark corridor mocked him and Will knew he was afraid. Suddenly another laugh, strong and high pitched and coming from somewhere just over there, somewhere just out of sight...

The corridor didn't seem to end. The more he walked, the less purchase he seemed to have on the floor. One and two and three and four and no more. Will put his hand against the wall but it burned: don't touch.

"Ellie?" he said, unable to raise his raspy voice, "Ellie sweetheart don't hide."

When Will looked left the corridor showed a doorway. Hiding little girls always picked the worst places. Will didn't want to go in. It felt wrong. Elle would pick the one place Will couldn't stand the thought of going.

The door handle was cold. He pushed it open and walked inside. The room was chill and dark, shot through with angles of bright, white light. The floor was slippery. When Will looked down, it ran red.

His heartbeat skipped.

He looked up, knowing what he'd find.

"Please," he begged.

The dinner table was set. Hannibal stood at the head, sharpening a long, wide based carving knife on a razor strop. On the wood lay a festoon of fruits and flowers, hiding within the thirty two heads of the thirty two bodies, gaping like a Greek chorus. At the other end of the table sat Eleanor, her childish fingers pulling at the hair of the nearest, knocking it over to expose the clean slice of its neck.

"Darling," Hannibal smiled as he lifted the knife, smoothing down the plastic suit he wore, shot with blood and matter and bone, "you're just in time for dinner."

Will lifted his hands, covered his eyes and wanted to wake up.

"It was all the way from Louisiana, can you believe that?"

"Hot damn, I didn't think there was such a thing as true romance any more, and here he gets her a ring from his mom."

"Tell me about it. That man just doesn't care what everyone says. I mean she's nothing special, but hell, what's that matter anyway?"

"Well some people...oh. Can I help you? Visiting hours aren't for another forty-five minutes."

"I'm not here for visiting hours, ladies."

"Look...ok. Yes, ok, I see. We just need to take his obs, then you can talk to him, alright Agent Crawford?"

"Take your time."

Will was forced to open his eyes. He had been laying there for about, well...he wasn't sure how long. His eyes felt gritty and he didn't want to open them to risk finding the time on the wall somewhere. Listening to the nurses talk had been easy. Easier than anything else was.

But then Jack, and then Starling and then waking up to gauze bandages at his neck and stitches in his face and second degree burn on his right arm, third on his left ankle and calf. And Jack talked and explained and Will tried to absorb a lot of information given in a short time and all he could really think about was...

“How’s Reba McLane?”

Jack, in the middle of telling Will how Aynesworth, the Section Chief, was down at the site with Janowitz still sifting through the remains, stumbled to a halt. He rubbed at his forehead, clearly annoyed that Will wasn’t as interested as he should be in Jack's talk of the Dragon's immolation but still unable to take it out on a man lying injured in a hospital bed.

“She’s fine,” Starling said soberly, “a few superficial burns to her right arm, she inhaled a lot of smoke and her hair’s in a state. That’s about it. You got her out in one piece.”

“She had...” he cleared his throat and choked, then couldn’t stop coughing. Jack helped him sip some water through a straw, “she had, uh, blood on her hands.”

“Dolarhyde’s,” Jack said, “dumb bastard shot himself in the head. She put her hands in it looking for the front door key he kept round his neck.”

Will swallowed slowly and grimaced. *It all seemed so wrong*.

“Oh. Ok.”

“Once you’re up and about I’m taking you to the local office. Aynesworth’s real pleased with you. Wants you to see his find first hand.”

“Mm hmm,” Will fumbled with the bandage at his neck.

“That window you threw yourself through wasn’t too friendly,” Jack said.

“Friendlier than the house was,” Will muttered.

Jack laughed. Starling smiled.

“Will, you’re gonna be alright,” Jack was smiling a little, gripping Will’s shoulder and giving him a squeeze; Will winced. His right shoulder normally didn’t give him any trouble, but the old bullet wound could be sensitive after heavy impact, “you know that, right?”

“Guess I haven’t got a choice. Is...is Eleanor here?”

“Marquez has her back at the safe house in Washington. It was the quickest route back to somewhere accessible. Didn’t want to make her take a plane journey without you. She’s been pretty upset, I hear.”

Will looked up. He caught Starling’s eye and didn’t need to say anything before she replied,

“The doctor said you’re good to go once your hydration levels are back up and they get something for the burns. I’m sure I could talk him down to letting you go tonight.”

“Thanks.”

She nodded softly, before turning and leaving. Jack looked slyly happy.

“You two are getting along. Don’t know how I missed that.”

“You didn’t. There’s nothing to miss. She’s a good kid, Jack, a real good kid. You gonna pass her without the exam?”

“Course I am.”

“Good. You should keep her too. BAU’s the best place for someone who can look where we look and not soak up all the shit. I was never any good at that. She’ll be better.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Graham,” Jack said, reaching out to help Will up. He felt woozy but it wasn’t something he couldn’t deal with. A few bottles of water, some paracetamol and he knew he’d be serviceable.

“I’m not,” he said, standing, “I’m just practical.”

“Ready to get back down to Highway 94 and get us some proof?”

“I’m ready,” Will said, locking eyes with Crawford, “to take my little girl home.”

“Will...”

“Jack.”

“Hell. You don’t half make things difficult.”

“It’s my specialty. But I want to see Reba first. She here?”

“Ward six, bay two. Just past the nurse’s station.”

“Thanks Jack.”

When he reached the ward they were handing out breakfast. Will hadn’t realised it was so early, *eight forty*. He took Reba’s and showed his credentials to the policewoman at the door.

She looked small in the bed. Not in size, just small. Fragile. Will knocked and he was sure she would have startled if she’d had the energy.

“Miss McLane,” he said, voice husky, “I’m Agent Will Graham. Can I come in?”

“Do you know him?” Reba asked the policewoman who still stood by the door, her eyes staring blankly at the wall.

“He’s a federal agent, Miss McLane,” she reassured.

“I was with you at the house,” Will explained.

Oddly enough that seemed to make things worse. She seemed to become more still; *smaller in that big bed*. Still, she let him inside. Will put her breakfast down on the table and told her what was there. She didn't touch it at first, but she did ask him to sit.

And then it all came out. He didn't think he had the wherewithal to write anything down, so Will recorded the impromptu interview on his phone. She spoke about her time with Dolarhyde. Her throat was sore and she stopped frequently to suck cracked ice. Will wondered how much longer she had been in the fire than he had. Reba couldn't remember or even hazard a guess.

He asked her all the unpleasant questions and she took him through it, only once waving him out the door while the policewoman held the basin to catch what little she'd managed of her breakfast.

She was pale and her face was scrubbed shiny when he came back into the room.

"I'm not going to ask you anything else," he said when he came back in, "but...I'd like to call back, see how you're doing. I have to go soon but I'd like to see how you are, if that's ok?"

"How could you resist?" she asked, tears in her eyes, "Charmer like me?"

For the first time, since the ID at Gateway and Baeder and knowing she was in that house and all the way though the gruesome interview, Will got a sense of who she was. And he knew where it ate at her.

He knew, because it was what ate at him too.

"Would you mind excusing us for a minute, officer?" Will asked.

The police woman left. Will reached out carefully and took Reba's hand. When he spoke he was surprised by how steady his voice was.

"Look here, there was plenty wrong with Dolarhyde but there's nothing wrong with you. You said he was kind and thoughtful to you. I believe it. That's what you brought out in him. In the end, he couldn't kill you and he couldn't watch you die," Will forced himself to keep going, even as it hurt to say it.

"People who study this kind of thing say he was trying to stop. Why? Because you helped him. That probably saved some lives. You didn't draw the maniac to you. You drew the man with the maniac on his back. Nothing wrong with you, kid. If you let yourself believe there is then you're a sap," *I should know*, *I should have known, I should know now.*

"I'm going to call from Washington when I land and see how you're doing, then I'll come back in a few days. I have to look at cops all day and night, I need the relief; try to do something about your hair there."

She shook her head and waved him towards the door. Maybe she grinned a little, he couldn't be sure. She thanked him, in a croaky voice.

"Thank you. I don't know what would have happened if...thank you, Will Graham."

Afterwards he made his way to the nearby Ward six waiting room, sat in one of the hard plastic chairs and broke down. Years of hate and love and pain and doubt and fear fought its way out of him whether he wanted it to or not. One of the nurses came in to ask if he was alright. He tried to tell her he was fine, but it was too hard a lie. She brought him a blanket and some black tea with sugar.

Will wasn't sure how long he sat there. Long enough for his untouched tea to go cold.

Starling found him first. He knew he must look wrecked. She sat down next to him quietly and folded her hands in her lap. It was reassuring. Somehow vilifying. He wanted to stop but there was no stopping it now. He wondered if this was how Reba had felt, as Will sat by her side and *wanted* to understand.

"You asked me," he said quietly, "when we first met, whether I thought he was putting the knife down."

He couldn't say it all at once. Will appreciated that she didn't speak. Just waited, patiently.

"You know, I've thought about it a lot. A hell of a lot. I've thought about *him* a lot. We had so many good times, you know? So many compared to that one. The one that blew all the rest out of the water. But you know what?"

Starling shook her head when Will turned to look at her.

"I know it doesn't matter, whether he was putting it down or pulling it right. It never did matter. Because all that matters is that he picked it up. He picked up that fucking knife and that's the point no one ever asks about. He picked it up and that's where everything stopped."

Will ground to a halt as the hysteria threatened to come back. He looked away and leaned his head on his hand, his elbow on his knee. He didn't want any answers or confirmation or an argument, and Starling seemed to know that. When he looked back to her she was reaching out to feel the side of his mug.

"Want another cup of that?"

"...Yeah."

"Gimme a minute."

They sat together and Will talked. The sweet sugar took the edge off the shock; an ancient remedy for a world-wide epidemic.

"We were two halves. That was always the problem. Two little halves that found each other in a sea of wholes. At first I couldn't stand him. Think my instincts were trying to tell me what my eyes couldn't believe. What my desires couldn't stomach the thought of.

"But he broke through the way no other could, because I wouldn't let them and I wasn't interested. He was...*interesting.* We were interesting together, interested in each other. Bad things happened to him, I know they did. Bad things have happened to me too. We would

argue and make up and laugh and cook and play and think together. Sometimes just be. Have you ever *just-been* with someone?"

"No," she said, "I'll admit it sounds tempting."

"You should try it," Will smiled hollowly, "it's probably the best thing you could ever hope for. It's freeing. I'm not sure...if being free is the best thing for me, but I'll always have it. I'll always remember it and smile. I don't know why I should have to lose that just because he killed people. I suppose, Hannibal and I were anathema and yet somehow, together, we came out the other end with love. An unspoken pact to ignore the worst in each other to continue enjoying the best."

"And that's true?"

"Oh," Will laughed shakily, "No. Not really. I think, secretly, we were enjoying the worst too. Maybe that's what made the difference."

"Do you still love him?"

"Always," Will said softly, "always. But it can't be like it was. I just can't keep living back in the times when I was truly happy," he looked at her, "there are none more blind than those who will not see..."

"And the most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know," Starling finished.

"You know your Swift."

"My dad used to buy me books. Lots of books. I had *Gulliver's Travels*. Guess I took a liking."

"He has good taste."

"Had," she corrected.

"Damn, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a long time ago."

"I think I'm living proof that time doesn't always matter. Physical pain, we forget that. Something hurts and we remember that it hurt, but that's it. The glass in my neck, I remember it hurting," Will rubbed softly at the gauze, "but I can't recall it. Mental pain...that's the kind that never leaves us. We can always bring it back at the snap of a finger."

"He said to tell you..."

Then she stopped. Will stared at her, knowing he must seem too eager. There was only one man she could be so hesitant in relaying a message from.

"He said to tell you something that doesn't matter anymore."

“What was it?” Will frowned.

“He said to tell you that if you ever need to find the gingerbread house you know where he is.”

Will blinked. *Can’t be*. It wasn’t, he wouldn’t. *And you know you can't care anymore.*

“Wait, when did he tell you this?”

“I went to see him while you were in Chicago. Thought I might be able to squeeze any last thing out of what he knows. We were desperate,” she shrugged, “it didn’t work.”

He nodded, even though he didn’t believe her. Clarice stayed silent, but she did not leave. Eventually Will stood up, folded his blanket neatly into a square and put it down on the seat. He turned to her and said,

“I’m ready to go home.”

Chapter End Notes

I just want to point out that the mention of spousal rape in this chapter isn't something I was trying to take lightly, in case it came across that way. So to explain, in this universe the idea of an alpha forcing themselves on their mate is frowned upon but 'understood' in certain circumstances by society at large, therefore the idea isn't as horrific to them as it should be. Of course there are people who are outraged by it, in as much as there are people today who think this is not a big deal to force themselves on their partners, and then there's the rest of us who think they're assholes and that it's horrifying and jail worthy. So, just to note that this is a cultural thing within my story. I'm sure you would expect Will to be far, far more upset about the whole affair otherwise.

Apex Predator

Chapter Notes

> And so, after six separate drafts, over ten different ideas at least and debating ceaselessly with myself over the past twelve chapters, I have finally decided how it's all going to go.
>
> This is it: the beginning of the end.

‘We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.’

Plato

“Hello, you’re watching CNN. This is Jane Conner in New York. Coming up we’re going to have some video from – or an exclusive interview with – Tunisia’s prime minister regarding the recent unrest.

"But first, breaking news: It has been confirmed that the man who has come to be known as the Red Dragon, a serial killer charged with the murder of two families in Birmingham and Atlanta, and assaulting several employees at the National Gallery in New York, has committed suicide.

“Earlier today FBI officials told CNN reporters that the Red Dragon, now confirmed as Francis Dolarhyde of St Louis, was thought to have been attempting a murder suicide with a female colleague. From the remains found it appears he shot himself after setting his house on fire. The woman, who will remain unnamed, was saved from the fire by one of the agents collaborating on this gruesome case. We are live now with Agent Jack Crawford of the Behavioural Analysis Unit in Quantico for more.

“So, Agent Crawford, is this an unexpected end to this chilling story?”

“Well Jane, there’s not really...we don’t like to make a lot of generalities about serial murder because it’s such a changeable thing. Those who perpetrate these sorts of crimes do so for wildly different reasons, or some have similar if not identical MO’s. We try our best to follow the behaviour they show and calculate how to react. I’ll admit that I had a feeling that it would end with the perpetrator taking his own life. There were several key factors, his unstable behaviour, the sexual nature of his crimes, a few more things I won’t disclose.”

“But there wasn’t a body for a full ID. Is it safe to say the remains in the fire are conclusive?”

“Oh yes, we don’t just rely on fingerprints and facial recognition. Our ID section here at Quantico can use many different tricks. Our guy had a very distinct dental pattern, which we have used to identify him. Also the witness at the scene of the fire confirms that he committed suicide.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll all sleep better tonight knowing that.”

“We sure will.”

“Before we run out of time, just one more question. There has been a lot of controversy regarding the involvement of a previous BAU Agent in this investigation, Will Graham...”

“I don’t think...”

“Only it has been confirmed that he was involved.”

“Yes, he was. In fact you can thank your lucky stars we brought him in. Will was integral in finding this serial murderer. If he hadn’t, another woman would have lost her life to his spree.”

“It has also been confirmed that your unit was consulting with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Graham’s mate. What are your thoughts about allowing contact between an omega and their alpha after incarceration?”

“I really don’t want to get into that.”

“I don’t know if you’ve seen it, but Baltimore’s Mayor Finn Jefferson has spoken out publicly against your allowance of an, as he quotes, ‘unstable omega to be prime on a case that requires such delicacy’.”

“If I can be frank, Jane, I’m not in politics for a reason. Both myself and Will Graham were given the roles we were because we’re good at what we do. If Mayor Jefferson has something to contribute to our unit, he can go through official channels.”

Ouch, Will thought as Jane Conner thanked Crawford and moved on to the next headline, *you’re going to pay for that one Jack*. *Purnell’s going to be all over you like a rash*.

Pulling out his headphones allowed the gentle hum of the plane to roam back into place while the news continued silently on his phone in his pocket. He rolled his shoulders but the ache in them didn’t abate. Airline seats had never agreed with him. He wished someone at the FBI had splashed out for first class seats. It was the least they could have done.

Next to him, in the window seat, Eleanor was fast asleep; small enough to curl up, with her head on a big stuffed toy dog that Will had bought her at the airport. Will reached down and brushed a stray ringlet from her face.

Presents were always bought when Will was feeling stressed and guilty; Elle had been odd with him after he’d picked her up from Marquez. She was quiet and withdrawn. Will had felt it like a stone in his heart.

‘Heard about McLane,’ Marquez had said as Will packed up the few things he’d left at the safe house, ‘you did good.’

‘Anyone would have,’ he’d tried to shrug it off.

‘Not many. You did good. She missed you, Eleanor, really missed you. Now you take her home and, don’t take it personally, but I don’t want to see you back here. Yeah?’

‘Yeah,’’ Will had smiled.

When they got to the airport Elle had still been soberly quiet, but she’d let him hold her hand. Will had spied the toy dog, *horrendously expensive and oversized,* and he’d pulled out his meagre credit card.

‘Hey squirt,’ he’d said, crouching down in front of her and putting the toy in her arms, ‘do you miss the dogs too?’

She nodded, taking it in her small arms, squeezing it with her hands. Her eyes were focused on him, her face oddly shy.

‘So do I.’

‘Are we goin’ home now?’

‘Yes. Yes I’m taking us home.’

‘Can I have the window?’

For some reason the trivial nature of the question made him smile. He had to swallow down the rising emotion. Jack was right, she was young enough not to care what he had put her through – as long as she got him back. *Don’t fuck up this second chance, Graham.*

‘I’ll make sure you get the window,’ he leaned in and pulled her to him with a hug, kissing her forehead, ‘don’t you worry.’

The in flight movie was trash. The news was depressing. Will tried to doze but the things behind his eyes weren’t conducive to sleep. *Charred, black teeth and a ball joint metal hip going down into the bone. The remains of the Red Dragon seemed small and insignificant and entirely unreal*. Will asked the air hostess if she had any aspirin. She got him some, and a glass of water. He decided not to take them dry.

“Daddy, can I get the bags? I wanna get my bag.”

It was like night and day; before she’d gone to sleep and when she’d woken up. Will was no fool, he knew she was still cautious of him, he could feel it, but she was being herself again. That was all he needed right now. They walked out into the busy airport with its echoing sounds and muffled tannoy, and Will felt a million miles from Baltimore.

It felt good, *if he didn’t focus on the bad parts.*

“Sure you can. You know what it looks like?”

“Uh huh, it’s red wif a big yellow flower. You hold Winston?”

“Ok,” Will took the toy, which Elle had refused to let go of since he’d given it to her, “but don’t run off without me...Elle!” he shouted as her eyes lit up and she ran off into the crowd waiting by arrivals.

“Daddy! Daddy look!”

“Ellie, don’t run. Wait...”

Then he saw what she saw. Will slowed to a walk, then stopped altogether. There seemed to be a causeway between them, even as people moved back and forth while Will watched Jeffrey Milo reach down and scoop Elle up, giving her a tight hug while she buried her face in his neck.

“Hey sweet thing, how you been? I missed you.”

Will stared at him. God, *he looked good*. Really good. Back-home-kind-of-good. It was hot in the airport even with the air conditioning, but Jeff was wearing a denim jacket over his green t-shirt. The beige trousers he wore looked odd with his bright green sandals. He looked a little odd. *And damn good.*

He looks odd period, Will thought, *because I don’t know what to do with this.*

“Where’d you go?” Elle was asking in a slow, careful tone.

“I had some things I had to sort out,” Jeff said, “grown up things. Silly things.”

“I miss-ed you. Daddy miss-ed you too.”

“He did, huh?”

Milo looked over to him. Will shifted on his feet and scanned the crowd. Jeff put Elle down and cleared his throat. There was a long silence, in which Elle looked between them and rocked back and forward on her feet, bottom lip between her teeth, utterly oblivious to the tension.

“The bags,” she whined.

“Right,” Will licked his lips, “let’s go get the bags.”

Jeff and Will stood together in the crowd from flight 129 while Elle hopped up and down by the carousel, her eyes searching avidly for their slow moving belongings. He’d given her back Winston the dog and she shook the slightly ruffled toy as she bounced about like a frog hopping lily pads.

They were silent, but Will could feel the unsaid words resting in the foot of space between them. Will tried to remember the last thing he’d said to Jeff, but it was lost to that misty night

of alcohol and regret.

In the end it seemed appropriate to start small.

“How’d you find us?” he finally asked.

“Crawford. You gave me his number before you left, remember?”

“Sure.”

“I saw the news. About the Tooth Fairy, Dragon, whatever he was calling himself. I was...I wanted to come out to the hospital but Crawford, well, he said you were already headed home. He gave me the flight number.”

“Ok.”

Silence, but for the sounds of the airport humming and chattering around them. Jeff cleared his throat and moved on his feet before asking:

“He really dead?”

“Uh huh.”

“And you’re really coming home?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“But are you coming home?”

It was difficult, because he didn’t want to breech it. It had been over, *they were over*, and that had been that. It hurt, it fucking hurt to remember it, and Will hadn’t wanted to ever think about it again. Because he hadn’t thought there was any chance that he was allowed to be normal, *and that he’d even want it if there were...*

“I don’t think that’s up to me,” Will said.

“Then is it up to me?” Jeff asked, slipping his hand in along Will’s back and grabbing him by the waist, “Because here’s your answer.”

The first try, Jeff bumped their noses together. The second, he stood on Will’s foot trying to get a better angle. By the time Milo managed to kiss him Will was laughing softly.

“Well, that went better in my head,” Jeff sighed.

“I hope so, because if that’s how you imagined it I’ll worry about you.”

“Wanna try it again?”

Will swallowed, looked up and found himself staring into Milo’s green eyes. It had been a while since he’d seen anyone look at him unguarded, open. *The last had been Hannibal, sitting in his cramped cell.* The thought had Will swallowing as he reached up and smoothed

his hand a little jerkily down Jeff's neck. *Don't screw up your second chances,* he warned himself, *don't fucking screw them both up.*

He knew the people around them were staring, or shaking their heads, or muttering about *inappropriate, in public, etcetera*. Will couldn't have cared less.

"Yeah, I could go for that," he said quietly.

"What a coincidence," Jeff murmured.

The kiss was soft and slow. Jeff added a little tongue. Will looped his arms around Jeff's neck. Jeff pulled his hands into the small of Will's back. It fit in all the right places. When they pulled apart Milo looked flushed. He cleared his throat and grinned.

"You've been working on that," he said, trying to divert away from his bashfulness.

"Well, you know me, I must have had a dozen guys at the station in St Louis," Will joked, smiling, "Maybe even some of the women too."

"Oh yeah? Did you bring me my present from the Easter bunny while you were at it?"

"I don't know," Will pushed his thigh forwards until it rubbed against the rock hard cock in Jeff's trousers, making the man inhale sharply, "if your present is the gun in your pocket, then yeah I might have."

And Will allowed himself to imagine that this was enough; because pretending was so much easier than the truth.

"I found it!" Elle was calling, pointing to her little suitcase, "Daddy, you'll miss it!"

"I got it honey," Will said as he disentangled himself, "oh, there's my one too. Nice job, eagle eyes. Come on, let's head back to the ranch," Will said while Elle giggled at his John Wayne impression.

Jeff drove them home in his dark blue Ford Tahoe; the trailer was still attached to the back but the boat was missing. It rattled as they drove.

Will sat in the front and watched Miami ripple in the hot sun. Everyone was on the streets, hair down, laid back, clothes as few as possible. It was about an hour and a half drive back to the Keys. When they got down to Manatee Bay Will rolled his window down, soaking in the smell of the ocean. So different from the grimy cities, where the air seemed greasy and stuck to the skin.

"Susan home?" Will asked.

"No, she's still with her sister."

"Does she know you're here?"

"Uh huh."

“Does she know I’m here?”

“Uh huh.”

Will left it at that. Jeff drove up his own driveway and parked.

“I thought Ralph had them,” Will said when Jeff opened his front door and five barking dogs bounded out; he crouched down but was soon bowled over, all tongues and yapping and paws, “oh, hey! Come on now, yeah, uh huh, I missed you guys too. Oh, come on,” Will laughed as his biggest, Angel the Bernese mountain dog, licked his face eagerly, “I love you too. Ah! Buster watch those claws buddy.”

“I brought them over when I got back a few days ago,” Jeff said as he put their bags inside, “Thought they’d appreciate the company.”

Will was laughing as Buster the Jack Russell cross jumped up on his chest and sat down, “I’d say I hope they weren’t a handful, but there’s not much point.”

“They’re not bad,” Jeff said as he gave him a hand up and Elle ran into the house, laughing as she trailed dogs after her like a freight train, “considering their owner’s such an animal.”

The momentum of Milo’s pull allowed Will to gather him close. Jeff laughed a little as Will leaned in, murmuring into his ear.

“I’m going to put Elle down for a nap and take a shower. Want to join me?”

Jeff seemed to be breathing him in as if to check he were real, then he said, “Don’t have to ask me twice.”

Despite her sleep on the plane Ellie was tired when he carried her up to Jeff’s guest bedroom on the second floor.

“You be here when I wake up?” she asked sleepily as he drew the curtains against the sunshine.

“I sure will, kiddo,” Will said as he leaned down to kiss her cheek, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“C-can I have chicken for dinner?” she yawned.

“Your wish is my command.”

Will set up Anthony’s old baby monitor in the room, flickering red and green in time with her sleepy breathing. Then he pulled the door to behind him and went to the bedroom, putting the other monitor on the bed side cabinet. The shower was already running in the next room, he could hear the soft shush of the water.

Will stripped, feeling as if he were pulling away layers of debris with every single thing removed. His sweaty shirt, his trousers with the coffee stain on the thigh, his socks, his

boxers, his watch: each piece was the dirt and the smoke and the blood and the shadows and the eyes watching him and the feel of the hand skimming his back and the lips at his ear.

Darling...

Will shivered, despite the heat. *Won't, shouldn't, can't help but...*

He walked to the bathroom naked. It let him enjoy Jeff's slight surprise, his eyes jumping down Will's body as he held his hand under the spray to adjust the temperature. Will had to wonder what Milo saw, if he could see the black bits clinging to him like leeches in the same way that Will felt them there, feeding.

He didn't give Jeff the chance to speak. Instead he took him by the neck and arm and kissed him. It didn't take long for Milo to shimmy out of his own clothes.

Then they were under the water, *and by god it felt good against his tired skin*, and Jeff was running his fingers gently over the stitches at his neck and on his right cheek, over the still shiny-skinned burns on his arm, *and Will didn't want to remember the heat and the flames and being left to die so*...their kiss became a slippery mess of tongues and hands and soap because he needed it to...*wash off all the things he couldn't think about, not anymore*...and then Jeff had him against the tiles with a...*strong and wonderful intensity and hell he'd missed being touched with such perfect carelessness*...and Jeff nudged Will's legs apart and was sliding his fingers in...*which was almost enough to distract from knowing they were the wrong hands on him, and the wrong mouth touching his, and the real need in him still churning*...as Will let his head fall back and panted, Milo stroking Will's stiff cock with his other hand while he asked...

"Tell me what you need, beautiful. Tell me what you need."

...the wrong question. Will knew it was the moment it hit the air. He opened his eyes and saw the thing he was not supposed to; not just somewhere in the room, not seen through the misting steam rising in the air, but there, touching him, all around him, inside him. For a few moments too long Will Graham became blind to Jeffrey Milo, and instead saw what he needed.

Hannibal stared down at him, hair wet, face flushed and open and willing as he slid another finger in to join the rest. *Willing to enjoy the best while ignoring the worst.* Will huffed out a harsh groan and contracted around the intruding digits. The memory was fierce and alive and Will wasn't sure which reality was the one he should be waking from.

"You," he admitted brokenly, "I need you."

Soon Will had his face buried in the damp skin of Jeff's neck while Milo took him slowly, rocking up and back with appreciated gentleness. Will thought he might have spoken, but most of it made little sense. They pushed it right up to the edge; Will could feel they were both close. When Milo tried to pull out Will held him tightly and muttered '*inside*'. Jeff groaned loudly and pushed in tight and fast until Will could feel the heat blossom within him.

By his ear Will thought he could hear words, mushy under the sounds of the water and their panted breaths. *You left me there*, Hannibal was saying, *you left me.*

“I’m sorry,” Will whispered, shivering, “I’m so sorry.”

“Huh?” Milo asked.

“Nothing. It’s nothing,” Will kissed him again, “nothing at all.”

“Oh come on,” Will shook his head, smiling slyly, “that can’t be right. You’re cheating. He’s cheating, right Ellie?”

She was grinning, pushing her face into Winston as she sat at the dining room chair and watched them play. Will sighed as she shook her head, her face and her girlish laughter lost to the plush fur.

It was the next day and little had changed. Will wasn’t sure what he had expected, but things had been entirely uneventful. It made a nice change to the last few weeks; waking up as if he hadn’t slept, feeling exhausted and yet wired, constantly in pain. Now he woke next to soft skin, sleepy snoring and half-asleep hands that searched for him when he got up too early. It was...pleasant. Normal. Some sort of fantasy, he was sure.

He hadn’t been back to his house yet. He wasn’t sure why, but they’d stayed at Milo’s until lunch. Then lunch had passed and they’d gone out to get groceries and...they’d driven right past Will’s driveway. He hadn’t questioned it.

Turning up at Jeff’s door, it felt like he wasn’t truly home just yet, that there was something else left to do.

Will rolled again, the dice clacking on the board as it tumbled; a four, “there, *that’s* better.”

“Now who’s cheating,” Jeff said as Will moved his piece across the board.

“No one likes a sore loser,” Will said as he handed Elle the dice; she threw it awkwardly into the air and it landed a perfect six, making Will raise a brow, “now that’s how you roll a dice.”

As Jeff moved her play piece forwards Will felt his phone ring in his pocket. Fishing it out revealed a text from Crawford. Will hesitated. The quick jump of his pulse made for a sickening realisation: *you were waiting for this.* The preview of the script on his screen only showed him, ‘*youre not going to...*’

He swallowed and opened it.

Youre not going to believe this, the text message read in full. After it was a link. Will pressed it and it brought up his browser. When he saw the name of the site he almost closed it again. It was the headline that made him stay.

Tattler.com – Prolific Cannibal Serial Killer Sues Asylum Doctor that Treated Him for Misconduct

It was revealed today that the infamous Doctor Hannibal Lecter is'nt mad about the service at the Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane. This reporter learned from inside sources that Doctor Frederick Chilton, the top dog at BSACI, has been accused by Lecter of unfair treatment and inhuman punishments during his three year stay.

Further to Lecters complaints, several of the other inmates have also lobbed complaints at their jailer, everything from sleep depravation to removing the toilet seats from the cells. It seems that Doctor Lecter isn't the only sadist in the joint.

To avoid muddying the waters, Lecter is being taken off-site to talk with his families lawyers and consult with medical and psychological examinations before this whole mess is taken to trial. So if you see any white vans with Baltimore plates passing in you're area, you might just be seeing Hannibal the Cannibal drive by.

Watch this space, Tattlers.

Will clicked his screen dark and turned his phone off. Jack was right, Will couldn't believe it; they'd managed to replace Freddie Lounds with someone with even less talent. He didn't think he'd seen so many grammar mistakes in one place at one time in a published piece. Even the headline was fucking hilarious; it sounded like Chilton had been treating Lecter for misconduct, rather than serial murder.

"Hey, your turn," Jeff was saying.

"Mmm? Oh, yeah."

"Everything ok?"

"Fine and dandy," Will lied as he rolled a two, "fine and dandy."

That night Will made Elle's second favourite meal: turkey burgers, fresh tomato sauce and spaghetti. They ate out on the porch and listened to the ocean while Jeff told Will and Elle about a work trip he'd once taken to Vietnam to identify a mysterious creature that had been pulled from the ocean. Days trekking to the site, bugs eating him alive, having to negotiate with the locals who were treating the animal as sacred, having to delay the funeral that they had set up by two days.

"Turned out it was a whale," was the punch-line, making Will shake his head and smile at Jeff's bluntness, "but still, it was a pretty cool whale."

Will fell asleep on the sofa with Eleanor after dinner while they watched Finding Nemo. *Odd dreams plagued him while his eyes were closed. But they slipped away as his eyes opened, leaving him with nothing but a sense of loss...*

When he woke up Jeff was shaking him gently, and the sun was waning in the West, setting the whole sky on fire. The gulls were calling outside while they rode the last of the thermals.

The living room was cast in long shadows. The T.V. was black and cold.

“Where’s Elle?” Will asked blearily.

“I took her up to bed. Kid’s totally pooped. Think all that travelling yesterday did her in. You coming up?”

“Uh, yeah,” Will blinked, “what time is it?”

“Just past nine. I thought we could have an early night after all the excitement yesterday.”

“Oh?” Will smiled softly.

“No funny ideas Graham, Elle’s not the only tired one around here.”

“You’re no fun. Let me make a quick phone call?”

“I’ll see you upstairs.”

Earlier, on reading the *Tattler* article, he hadn’t wanted to. Now, comfortable and warm and a little sleepy, the terse feelings had left him. *Even if the loss hadn’t.* He picked up his phone and dialled the familiar number.

It rang out twice before anyone picked up.

“Lecter residence,” a polite, New England accent answered.

“I’d like to speak with Lady Murasaki.”

“She is currently indisposed...”

“It’s urgent.”

“May I ask who is calling?”

“Tell her it’s Will Graham, and that if she doesn’t take it now I’ll just keep calling back.”

“I...of course,” the accent said uncertainly.

The wait was long and echoing. Will thought he could hear far off noises. *The sounds of the house where he and Hannibal had been the furthest apart, whilst also being the place that pushed them closer together.* He remembered the house with a lot less than fondness. *Antipathy perhaps*. Mmm, Will thought, that was about right; antipathy.

Eventually there was a scraping sound. Then breath.

“I doubt what is urgent to you is also urgent to me.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Will said acidly, “sometimes the two overlap.”

He knew she understood him. *Hannibal.*

“I can give you two minutes,” Murasaki’s sharp tone was as familiar as ever.

“All I’ll need,” Will said, “So. This your doing?”

“Pardon?” she asked, offended.

“Sending Chilton down the river. Was it yours or Hannibal’s?”

“My nephew informed me of his ill treatment and asked for my help. Is that something you find out of the ordinary?”

“After three years he suddenly throws you this line and you don’t find that in the *least* odd?”

“I am amazed that you did not question these injustices when you saw them yourself.”

“He was fine last time I laid eyes on him. Revelling, in fact.”

“The eyes of the snake have a better view than that of the mouse in its burrow.”

“Burrow,” Will laughed nastily; seeing Will as the predator and Hannibal the poor victim tickled him to no end, “have you ever seen Hannibal’s cell, Lady Murasaki?”

Silence.

“Oh, so you’ve never been. I see. Well let me paint you a picture. It’s twelve by sixteen. Grey walls in a white corridor, enough to turn your eyes. The bed is barely long enough to hold him. Toilet, sink, all open fronted with tight bars. He has his sketches on his walls, and he has his books on his shelf; except when Chilton takes them away for threatening people, or worse.

“In his spare time he likes to speak to second rate psychiatrists, write journal articles, read Italian poetry and rip out nurses’ eyes and tongues,” his voice raised as his throat constricted, “Are *those* the injustices you’re speaking about?”

“He is alone.”

“He *made* himself alone,” Will bit back.

“You want him to be trapped there forever,” she accused venomously.

“Of course I fucking don’t!”

They both fell silent. Will found it difficult to breathe. He ripped the phone from his ear before Murasaki had a chance to reply and ended the call. The soft silence of the house seemed to stare at him. Will rubbed at his face and tried to calm down.

There seemed no chance of that.

When he went upstairs Jeff was already dozing. The bedroom was painted red with the sunset. It was unnerving, he didn’t like it; too close to the last three and a half weeks. Will

pulled the curtains to and undressed. When he slipped under the thin blanket a warm arm pulled him close. Jeff's tired voice spoke from the gloom.

"Earlier I asked if everything was ok, and you said yeah."

Will wanted to refute him, say it was nothing, keep the lie going for as long as he could. Instead it choked in his throat. He took a long sigh and reached up, running his hand over Jeff's arm, through the silky blonde hairs there.

"I might have underplayed that a little."

"How much is a little?"

"A lot," Will said; he cleared his throat, "Hannibal's suing Chilton for misconduct."

"Uh huh?"

"That's all it is. It isn't anything to worry about."

"So who'd you call?"

"His aunt. I just wanted to...to know why. Or how...I just wanted to know what's going on."

"Ok."

"...Really ok?"

"Yeah. You're not there with him, you're here with me," Jeff leaned in and kissed his jaw, "that's all I need to know right now."

"Jeff."

"Mmm?"

"Thanks."

"What for?"

"You know what for," Will turned over onto his side and curled around Milo, resting his head on his shoulder; he swallowed and forced his face against Jeff's skin, "I'm gonna check out. Don't wake me?"

"I won't."

A week or so later Will walked back through his own front door. The air smelled a little musty with the heat and the absence. He opened a few windows, in the kitchen and the front room to make a through draught. Then he sorted through his mail.

Bills, some more bills, some adverts for a new boat tours company further down the beach, a couple of credit cards trying to sell themselves, and his pay-check. Will opened it and found the familiar layout of the FBI payroll system, everything broken down into expenses and hours worked and danger pay and so on and so on.

It was more than he would make in six months working at the garage. Will stared at the figure for a little while, then stuffed it back into the envelope and put the whole pile on the dining table. He spent half an hour emptying the fridge of spoiled food, cleaning it, making lists of things that needed done. Then he picked up the mail and left his silent house the way he had found it, but for the windows which he left open just a crack.

He was at the bank when the call came through.

“Hey,” Jeff sounded a little out of breath.

“Hi. You ok?”

“Me?” Jeff laughed through his panting, “Yeah, fine. I thought the dogs were bad, but Eleanor sure knows how to make you run.”

“I told you to put the harness on her in the department store.”

“Ah, where’s the fun in that?” Milo said while Will shook his head and moved forwards in the long line; there was a sound of car doors on the other end, an engine starting, “Anyway, I was just wondering if you needed anything brought in. We’re heading for Publix up at Tradewinds.”

“What’s your plan for tonight? It’s meant to be nice till late. We could barbecue on the beach.”

“Sounds good to me. They have that great deli there, I’ll get a bunch. You like mackerel right?”

“Love it, so does Elle. Oh and could you grab some dog food? They like the 777 dry and Skippy for the cans.”

“And here I was just feeding them steak.”

“Ah, don’t spoil them,” Will said, hesitating before he added, “could you...could you maybe get some nice desert for Ellie? Let her pick.”

“Still feeling guilty huh?”

“Don’t rub it in.”

“Yes boss.”

“Hey, no bedroom talk in public,” Will teased.

“Ha! Alright, I’ll save it for later.”

“See you.”

By the time he hung up he was at the front of the line. Will sorted his cheque and made sure his overdue bills were paid. It was a novel feeling, being carefree and up to date with his money. Not enough to lure him back to Quantico, but enough to remember how pleasant it was to not be scratching the bottom of his wallet most days.

As he walked back towards the entrance, bright in the glaring sun, his phone rang again.

“What’s the matter hot stuff, get lost in the pet food isle?”

“Well,” Jack Crawford said, his voice strained even as he tried to joke, “been a long time since someone called me that.”

“Jack. Hey. Wasn’t expecting you.”

“Clearly.”

“No, really, I wasn’t expecting you,” Will said seriously, “something wrong?”

“That’s one way of...yeah. Yeah it is. Look, are you somewhere we can talk?”

“Not really. Give me a minute to get to the car? I’ll call you back.”

And suddenly the bright sunshine and the level headed happiness and not having to think about bills and looking forward to dinner on the beach, was all dulled. Muted. His stomach hadn’t bothered him in days, but now it knotted unpleasantly. Like the appreciated but unnervingly familiar pay-check, Jack Crawford was adding to his déjà-vu; the man always made sure you were somewhere safe before he gave you really bad news.

In his hot car, midday in the parking lot out front of the First National Bank, Will Graham phoned Jack Crawford back.

“Ok, hit me with it.”

“Are you sitting down?” Jack asked.

“What am I, five years old?”

“I’m not fucking around Graham. Sit down and don’t interrupt me.”

And Jack told him.

“And-and-and then I’d fly round all the streets and get all the bad guys and I’d-I’d *drop* them in the jails!”

“Yeah?” Jeff said, grinning as he drove back to the house, Eleanor in the passenger seat, making wild gestures with her arms as she talked, “so you’re going to be a cop like your dad, huh?”

“Uh huh,” she said, hugging Winston, “cause then I could get all the bad men and he wouldn’t have to worry and I’d do the right things.”

“Well, Anthony’s coming down to visit in a few weeks,” Milo changed the subject as it steered close to the things he’d rather avoid, “that’ll be nice.”

Because he’ be damned if his ruined marriage was going to ruin his family, and Susan had promised not to let this get in the way. Even if she’d still slapped him twice, hard, when he’d said he was going back to the Keys. He’d known he deserved it. Sometimes there was no right thing to do, and those were the most difficult of times.

“Yeah, yeah!” Elle was bouncing in her seat, “I have to tell him about all of the things I’d seen a-and we can go lookin’ for starfish. When’s he comin’?”

“Next week, hopefully. But first we’re gonna barbecue, right?”

And when he pulled into the driveway that’s what he had on his mind. Cooking fish, drinking a few beers, and maybe kissing Will until the man asked him to stop – which he hoped he never did.

Instead he turned in off the road to get a view of his front porch, with Will sitting on the stairs next to a lumpy holdall with a jacket slumped on top. Jeff stepped out with a frown, which worsened when Will didn’t get up to help Eleanor out of the car. When Jeff picked her up and put her on the ground, she ran to her father and hugged him; Will in one arm, Winston the dog in the other.

“Thank you daddy for the ice-cream.”

“That’s ok sweetheart,” Will said, his voice low and hollow, “you go inside, ok? I need to speak to Mr. Milo.”

“What’s going on?” Jeff asked as Elle hurried through the open door.

“Want help with those?” Will asked, nodding to the bags in the backseat.

“Will...”

“I’ll do the fridge if you do the cupboards.”

They put away the groceries in silence. Will would set things up on the counter for Jeff, and Jeff would stare at him while he did it. Eventually the bags were empty and Will had nothing left to distract him with.

“That bag on the stairs,” Jeff said coldly as Will wiped his hands on a hand towel, “you going somewhere?”

“Something’s happened. I need to go back north.”

Jeff nearly bit his own tongue snapping his mouth shut as he tried to speak. Will was watching him from the corner of his eye. When Jeff managed to stop himself from saying what he actually thought, his words were calm and calculated.

“Whatever’s going to come out of your mouth next better be fucking good.”

“Dolarhyde isn’t dead.”

“*What?*”

“I said Dolarhyde...”

“I heard what you said, Will.”

So Will stopped talking, which only made Jeff angrier and more confused. Normally Will was a man to speak his mind when he needed to, or even just wanted to. He hadn’t been when they’d first met, when Jeff was still forcing himself into Will’s reluctant life. He’d been quiet and introverted and Jeff had learned to tell the difference between when Will was biting his tongue or just genuinely had nothing to say.

Now was a biting-tongue moment. Jeff felt his world sway and he sat down in a nearby dining chair.

“Tell me you’re not going back,” was all he could say.

“I have to.”

“No, you don’t *have to* do anything. Are you sure he’s even alive?”

“We’re sure. Jeff...”

“No, don’t. Fucking don’t,” Jeff said, over-annunciating, “You’re worried he’s gonna come after you, is that it? Well isn’t that what the FBI is for? Christ, they owe you, they owe you big time. Get them to send agents down here, take it in *fucking* shifts until the bastard tries something. Let them. And let him too. Let him come down here and try and kill you, I’ll fucking shoot the bastard between the eyes. Let them all just fucking try it, Will, let them, but for the love of god please *don’t leave*.”

The silence answered for him. He felt ill and furious all at once. It had been such a great week. He’d felt like everything was slotting back into place. *He felt that Will had let the shadows of his past lift from his life. He had felt that Will had finally fallen for him the way he had fallen for Will.* Now everything was disconnected and unfamiliar, because one of the cogs in his smooth machine had fallen loose.

Milo stood up and walked to the front door. Will didn’t follow. He picked up the holdall and brought it inside, dropping it on the kitchen table.

“Not much in here,” he said, opening it with a harsh pull of the zip.

“Jeff...” Will rubbed at his face.

“A change of clothes, your gloves, sunglasses, aspirin. Wow, travelling light.”

“You haven’t even asked why...”

“Because I don’t *care* what sorry excuse you’re gonna give me.”

“I told you Hannibal was suing Chilton, right?”

“Oh what has this got to do with *anything?*” Jeff yelled.

“Chilton loaded him in a security van yesterday at midday. He was being transferred to a local county before he could be taken for assessment.”

“Will, please...”

“Three security guards, two medics and a driver,” Will’s eyes were dark when he caught them, “Dolarhyde was posing as one of the security.”

“How’d you even know?”

“Because when the van didn’t arrive on time they put out an APB. Found it today, five miles out of Lewisburg Pennsylvania. And of the six guys in the van, one was missing. Hannibal too. They called the FBI in because they thought...at first they thought that Lecter had escaped. Only there were prints. Unknown prints. Jimmy Price ran them and...they’re Dolarhyde’s. Dolarhyde’s prints on the back door and the steering wheel. He faked it, Jeff, he faked the whole damn thing with Reba and the fire. Jack was quick on the draw, he...”

The whole time, Jeff hadn’t truly been listening to the words coming from Will’s mouth. Instead he’d been watching his face, trying his best to read him. Will was being purposefully blank and evasive. Which led him to one conclusion.

"...so they tested the bones we thought were his and it turns out they matched them to some gas store attendant Dolarhyde and McLane had a tiff with a few weeks back..."

“You’re going for him,” Jeff interrupted.

“...What?” Will stumbled to a halt in his explanation.

“You’re going for *him?*”

A silence, in which Will grimaced and scratched at his jaw, “Why would you even ask me that?”

“If it was you, would he come?”

“I don’t know,” Will said strictly, “and none of that matters, because I’m not him. I never will be.”

“Isn’t that the point? Jeff stressed, “You’re not him, Will. You’re you, and you belong here.”

“I’m not going to leave him to die. He's my family.”

It was the most conviction he’d ever heard from Will’s mouth. He’d said it and he meant it, one hundred and fifty percent. Will Graham still loved that sadistic lunatic, *and Jeffrey Milo couldn’t accept that.*

“You don’t even know! You don’t even know that’s what happened! Maybe he...maybe he let Lecter go, you ever think of that? You said this guy idolised him, right?” Jeff knew he was clutching at straws, “You said he wanted to meet him. Maybe he let him go and now they’re both in the wind.”

“I said the Dragon wanted to meet Lecter,” Will nodded, “but it wouldn’t have been for a friendly chat. He wants to kill him, Jeff. Just as much as Hannibal wants to kill him too.”

“What the fuck are you *talking about*?” Jeff asked, his tone incredulous.

“I didn’t say it would be rational,” Will shrugged, “though it will be rational to them. Hannibal honours those he kills, when he feels like it. And for Dolarhyde, well Lecter didn’t play his game. He kept me a secret from the Dragon. And taking Hannibal is another way to get at me, he knows that.”

“Oh he does.”

“Jeff...”

“This is...I don’t want to *hear* it. Alright? I don’t want to hear it,” he didn’t want to let Will know he was upset, but it was impossible to hide, “Cause you’ve made up your mind.”

“He wants to kill him Jeff...”

“Oh god, I don’t care! I don’t care, alright? I care about Eleanor and I care about *you*. I don’t care what happens to Hannibal fucking Lecter! The man is a fucking monster! I want you to be safe, you understand that? I want you and Elle to be safe with me.”

He was interrupted by the sound of a car pulling up outside. Jeff turned and looked, finding a taxi sidling into the bottom of the driveway. The honking horn was loud and abrasive. When he turned Will was gathering up the items Jeff had pulled from his bag, stuffing them back inside.

“Don’t. Please don’t.”

“I need to say goodbye to Elle.”

Jeffrey Milo sat at his dining room table and put his hand to his mouth. He could hear the sounds of distress floating down the rigid stairs. *What do I do?* He asked, his mind racing, *What do I do?* When Will reappeared Jeff stood up and grabbed at him. Will let him, pulling Jeff close with his own reluctant hands. They fit together like two halves and Jeff grabbed the back of his neck, his other hand taking a fistful of his shirt.

“I didn’t mean for this to...I’m sorry. I’m sorry Milo,” the horn from the taxi interrupted them, but Will continued regardless, “don’t want you to think I don’t love you too. You’re too good for me, you know that? You’re a great guy, and you’re too good for me.”

Will kissed him and Jeff held him close.

“If you go, that’s it,” Jeff felt like he was threatening a tiger with a match, and it hurt, *god did it hurt.*

I love you, Jeff thought*, I love you so goddamn much.* If he'd thought it would stop Will in his tracks he would have said it. Only he knew it wouldn't, and knowing that only made the pain all the sharper. Will reached up and touched his face, ran his thumb over his lips.

“Keep her safe for me.”

And then he was gone. Jeff swallowed.

The taxi left behind a broken man sitting in his empty kitchen, serenaded by the fitful crying of the child on the second floor who truly believed that her father was never coming home.

In the Garden of Eden

Chapter Notes

> People who have seen 'Manhunter' will probably get the joke in the title of this chapter. If you haven't seen it, go watch it immediately. William Petersen is a great Will Graham, it has a fantastic soundtrack and it is the 80's encapsulated. Utter, heart-pounding, tension riddled nostalgia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reach behind you, Will Graham...and feel for the small...knobs on the top of your pelvis. Feel your spine between them...that is the precise spot...where the Dragon will snap your spine.

Standing in Miami airport in the dozy heat, the tramp of dozens of unknown feet and the echo of unknown voices around him, Will reached behind himself, slowly sliding his hands down across his back to his pelvis. His shoulder complained at the stretch; he paid it no attention. With his thumbs he pressed flat against the thin cotton of his shirt and then slid inwards.

...that is the precise spot...

“You want to break me?” he murmured, his eyes closing, eyebrows twitching to a frown.

People walked around him, some looking up curiously, most ignoring him altogether. *Normal people made for everyday things. They tended not to see the oddities, or care if they did.* In amongst the crowd, Will spoke to the man who was not there. The man that could be seen only through his eyes.

“You want to humble me. You want to...humble us both before the Dragon.”

The crooked teeth grinned, ready to bite.

“You’ll get your chance,” Will whispered, “we both will.”

There was only one chance. One chance to be free of it all. Will wished he didn’t have to risk it. Only there was too much at stake. Too much.

Jack had told him everything they knew. How they thought the Dragon had faked it, gone to Baltimore, taken Lecter, then headed further north out into the wilds. Jack was convinced he had a search area narrowed down. He’d sent all of the information they had on Dolarhyde, his medical and personal history, what little there was of it.

Abandoned by his father. Passed from family to family to foster care and then back to family. Only ‘family’ had ended with Mrs Dolarhyde, and from what he could find on her she didn’t seem the grandmotherly type. Will could imagine what it had been like, growing up in the old

folks home his grandmother owned. Stern and out of touch. Staring at death every day; wobbling old timers on their last legs, dripping soup down their chins as they fawned over him. Dying and out of touch and bad things for bad little boys.

Will had seen as much as he could of a man he thought he might be starting to know rather than just *see*, hiding in the dark. A creature of habit. A man of instinct. Someone outwith their time. *He would look for familiarity, comfort, safety.* Not new and unexplored places.

Will was also convinced, only not by Jack. He knew this would be his only chance to end this.

It was too noisy on the concourse, all pulled luggage wheels on the rubber matted floors, people laughing and talking and saying goodbyes. Will found a small shop selling expensive looking watches, mainly empty but for a man and a woman browsing. He hoped that no one stopped his call, as he pulled out his phone.

It rang four times, then, "Ward six," a man's peremptory voice stated.

"Hi, this is Jack Crawford, FBI. Not sure if we met a few days ago. I need to speak Reba McLane in bay two."

"Uh, ok," the man sounded a little taken aback; Will was glad, that meant he hadn't met Jack when they'd taken Reba in, "can I get some sort of ID?"

"Look, son, this is an emergency. I'd rather not call attention. Can you do that for me? I just need five minutes of her time. You're saving lives here, you understand?"

"Yes, yes of course I...please hold."

He wondered, as the man put the phone down and transferred him to another line, whether Jack would follow him. It wasn't a pleasant thought. Of course he'd have to find his way there first. Will frowned; Starling might be a problem. She was sharp, intuitive. Will hoped it didn't come to that.

He had made up his mind, *not short and quick and spur of the moment:* that would have made it easier. No, he'd thought this through. And it was the only chance he was going to get.

"Hello?" the soft voice of Reba McLane was the next thing he heard.

"Hi Miss McLane," he said, "told you I'd call, didn't I?"

"I thought that this was...is that Will Graham?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"The nurse told me..."

"Don't mind that right now. I need to speak to you, is that alright?"

“I don’t see why not. Really nothing better to do,” she sounded better, lighter, less close to blank hysteria than she had been; Will tried not to hurry himself, “I should be good to go home soon.”

“Great to hear. Look, have you heard the news?”

“News?”

“About Dolarhyde.”

“I...yes. One of the nurses put my television on and it was CNN and...I asked them to turn it off.”

“Reba, can I trust you to do something for me?”

“I guess so. I mean, yes. Yes.”

“Don’t tell anyone that I called you. Can you do that?”

“What’s going on?” she sounded worried.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble. Can you do this for me? I need your help.”

“I think so. Yes. I’m sorry this is just a little confusing.”

“That’s my specialty. I promise not to make this anymore of a mind twist, ok? Alright. Was there anywhere Dolarhyde took you that was, I don’t know, a special place of his? Not his house, somewhere else. Somewhere remote that only he might have access to.”

“Uh, no. Why would you ask that? I thought you had all you needed from me.”

“I did. I do. But this is important. Really important for something I’m working on.”

“I don’t know. I don’t, really.”

“Listen to me. Listen,” he lowered his voice and took a deep breath, “he isn’t dead Reba. Dolarhyde’s alive.”

He thought he could feel her breathing slow, “What did you say?”

“You heard what I said.”

“No that’s...” she sounded elated and terrified all at once, “that’s not fair, you’re not being fair. You can’t call me here and tell me these things. The newscaster said...”

“We were wrong. I’m sorry. We were wrong, Reba. He’s alive, and he’s taken someone I care about very much. So if you know of anything, anything at all that could help, then please you’ve got to tell me. Please.”

“Why are you doing this? Can’t you leave me be?” and now she was upset, and he knew why; *you just want to forget, don’t you?* Will thought, *and I’m keeping it all fresh for you,*

“Why are you doing this?”

“Reba, please. I need you to tell me. Did he have somewhere else that he would go, that he took you to, maybe told you about?”

“He didn’t tell me about anything like that.”

He knew that tone. He knew she had what she needed. And he knew why she wouldn’t give it to him. *Not now that she knew there was still a chance.*

“Did he take you there one time?” Will asked slowly, “Reba, I’m sorry. You have to believe that I’m sorry about what’s happened. I know you never wanted him dead. There’s a part of you that wants to help him, right? The piece of you that he touched, the piece that knew he really wanted to love you.

“But the rest of you,” he said, “it’s the rest of you that wants to see him hurt just as badly as he hurt you,” Will Graham spoke steadily, no-nonsense, “Reba,” he said, “I need that part of you to tell me where he is.”

There was silence, but he could hear her on the other end. She was sniffing. He couldn’t tell if she was crying or not.

“Reba,” he pushed, “Reba please. I’m begging you.”

“The zoo,” she said, her voice wavering a little, “he took me to the zoo, just once. There was a...a tiger getting his tooth removed and they let us in because D helped them film with an infra-red and...they...they’ve got an area of sectioned off for maintenance, no one goes in there, and they gave D the pass key so he could get in for – ”

She stopped, as if swallowing her words. Will felt his pulse race. A zoo. *A fitting cage for the beasts to play in.* It felt right. Damn it felt right. *You would take him there, wouldn’t you, because there’d be no chance of interruption. Because no one would find him for days if you wanted to make a mess.*

“Please, Will,” Reba was speaking through tears, “please if you can...”

“I’ll try and help him. I promise.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry he’s hurting you but please...”

“I have to go. Don’t tell anyone that I called, ok?”

The cash in his wallet bulged out. Will bought a return flight to St Louis, a *five hundred and twelve dollar whack out of his emergency fund;* it was worth it, because it made him feel optimistic.

You’d better be right about this, Graham, he warned himself, *or this is going to take a lot of explaining.* Will choked out a laugh. Who was he kidding? There would be no explaining this to anyone.

After he was done, Will took down the few numbers he might want from his phone: *Home, Milo,* and just in case - *Murasaki.* Then he took the back off his mobile, removed the battery and the sim-card, and cracked the inside open with aid of his keys. Will dug out the GPS unit, placed it upon the floor and crushed it. The rest found its way into the trashcan.

How long till Jack caught on? Will couldn't calculate it with any certainty. Jack was good at being paranoid, but he tended to give a little leeway where Will was concerned. Considering what had happened and the fact that Will would be expected to blame him, it would be plausible that Will wouldn't be quick to pick up the phone when Crawford called.

That ought to buy me some time, Will thought, *hopefully enough*. He checked the flight times on the board. Boarding wasn't for another fifty minutes, and then two hours forty five, non-stop flying. He'd be in St Louis by eight o'clock.

Will reached behind him and rubbed at the spot between the *knobs on the top of his pelvis*, *the precise spot where...*

He licked his lips slowly and savoured the taste of the hunt; *musk and gun-smoke and black hooves running.* He wished he hadn't promised Reba; it made him feel a remorse he wasn't willing to risk.

A remorse he wouldn't feel when he knew Dolarhyde was dead and gone, once and for all.

Hot on his tongue, it tasted like warm plums; sweet but bitter.

"Umm, more port maybe?"

Beside him, Hannibal appeared to be watching for his reaction, hand outstretched to pick up the tall peppermill.

"Actually if I add any more the sauce will not thicken. You would prefer it richer?"

"A little," Will sucked the teaspoon clean and then licked his lips.

The scent of roasting lamb secreted from the oven. It had been a couple of weeks at least since they'd had enough time, or energy, to cook together. Will had missed it, even if he was now actively using it as a distraction.

"Then, some butter," Hannibal snagged the butter dish and cut a large knob from the corner, dropping it into the pan; as Will sliced the onions into curling strips, Hannibal pulled a small glass bottle from the fridge containing a red, syrupy substance, "and a little magic."

"What's that?" Will asked, blinking as his eyes began to water.

"Secret ingredient. You must still allow me my secrets."

“Well, have you any secrets worth sharing about making this hurt less?” Will asked as he sniffed, wiping his right eye with the back of his hand as the onions took effect.

“Breathe in through the mouth, out through the nose.”

“Tried that,” Will let out a sound of pain as the onions effused, his tears overflowing, “not working. Ah. Jesus, these things are fresh.”

“Best wash your hands and step outside. Clear air is the best remedy,” Hannibal took his knife and the board of offending onions to the cooker, “I will seal these.”

The sky was dark and the air was nippy. Where there were no clouds, the stars were bright. He could see Orion’s Belt, but not Sirius. Will breathed in through his nose until the tears ceased flowing and the stinging abated.

Fuck*, he thought succinctly.*

Standing at the back door, listening to the sound of sautéing onions sizzle softly, Will wondered how to break the news. At first he’d thought it would be simple: wait for Hannibal to come home and their bond would take care of the rest. He’d thought it a quirk of their biology that his mate would notice and take the responsibility out of his hands.

Only there had been nothing in their usual greeting. Hannibal had kissed his neck softly and then walked past him to the living room. So then Will had thought about springing it straight away, only Hannibal had needed to take a phone call and Will had hesitated too long and, well, he could tell him later right?

And now it was half past seven and Will was standing at the back door, unusually nervous and very pregnant. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure why he was so anxious about the big reveal. They’d been trying for nearly two years now. Hannibal would be just as happy as he was, Will knew he would be. And yet...he’d even considered calling Alana with the news, as a test run. Of course he hadn’t, in the end. He knew if Hannibal found out he wasn’t the first to know the man would be coldly cross with him for god knows how long.

“Feeling better?”

Will looked over his shoulder and smiled. In his white apron beneath his royal blue shirt, Hannibal looked as close to domestic as he ever got. Will always teased him about his neatness in the kitchen, not that it was any different to the neatness Hannibal exercised everywhere else. Still, the sauce stain on the white material by his hip, and the smear of lamb’s blood on the side of his wrist served as a reminder that Hannibal was not always the perfect, refined gentleman.

He was a man, when it came down to the grit. Tell him*, Will told himself,* just bloody tell him.

“How long till dinner?” he asked instead.

“Another hour and a half I’m afraid. Apologies to extend your fast, but I was delayed after theatre, and then...but of course, you do not need to hear all about that.”

“That’s alright. I can wait.”

Will could feel the intensity of eyes on him, “You seem...” Hannibal paused.

“I’m fine,” he lied, “*if we’ve got time I’m going to put a white wash on. You have anything needs doing?”*

“A small bundle.”

“Laundry bag upstairs?” Hannibal nodded and Will swallowed, “I’ll get it.”

He made it to the stairs before he realised, turning back sharply. Hannibal had been following him, like he felt he had. The man stood like a sharp eyed statue in the doorway while Will watched, mouth slightly parted.

It felt real somehow, this. Before, what was between them could have been anything. Make believe, a fairy tale, a life he might be forced to one day wake from. Sometimes it seemed so far from what he’d expected his life to be that it was a little surreal. There was a dream-like quality that circled them constantly, making Will dizzy with the energy of it.

They were a content little froth of life atop the water, always prone to the swell that would rise and pull them under.

“I’m pregnant.”

And now it was concrete, solid, unmovable. Sometimes*, Will thought,* if we believe the fairy tale long enough, even it becomes true.

There were no words; Hannibal seemed to understand that. Will stayed stock still as his mate approached, reaching up to slide a waiting hand against Will’s chest. It slid lower, softly moving across his shirt.

What does this mean to you? *he wondered,* Our child. I want to teach them about the world, to find them a dog to love, to show them how to ride a bike, to take them on boat trips, teach them to fish, hate the people that make them miserable and resent the people that they’ll eventually leave me for, be sad as they grow up but glad that they *are* growing up well and knowing that I’ll always be there for them, no matter what. Is that what you want?

He could not ask, because he feared the answer might be as damning as it could be reassuring. Instead, as he watched Hannibal’s hand descend, Will realised that he couldn’t be completely certain that their futures were the same, and the thought scared him.

The slight frown on Hannibal’s face read ‘I thought I would have known’, while he watched his own fingers linger against the front of Will’s pelvis; eventually he asked, “How long?”

“Two weeks,” Will cleared his throat, “the tests all said two weeks.”

“How many did you use?”

“Twelve,” Will said through a shrug.

“Then you are certainly sure,” Hannibal said with a small, affectionate smile.

“Certainly.”

“Darling,” Hannibal gathered him slowly into a warm embrace, stroking a firm hand down the length of his spine; they stood that way for a time. Will drank in the welcome and yet unusual serenity that Hannibal radiated. When he did speak again, his voice was low, murmured into Will’s ear, “it appears that, sometimes, the teacup can come back together.”

“Meaning?” Will asked, confused.

“The human condition and its vagaries; wishing for the impossible, the grass always being greener. The clock turning backwards, allowing us to watch the shards reform without cracks with which to trace the break. My child, once more whole.”

“I’m just going to enjoy the fact that this has apparently broken your ability to make sense,” Will said, nuzzling Hannibal’s neck.

“You are a vessel,” Hannibal said with calm reverence, “for all that is right in our world.”

“I feel like I should be insulted by that.”

“No. Not at all. For the contents of a vessel take on the form of the vessel itself, much as the tea in the teacup takes on its shape. Without it, the form would be lost...as it was lost, so long ago. Now,” he reached up and ran his hand through Will’s neat hair, running down to hold the base of his neck tenderly, “everything is back where it is supposed to be.”

“Hannibal?”

“Yes?”

“I know.”

The kiss was soft, affirming. Will knew he wasn’t afraid, even if he would always worry. Bravery was for those who blindly pushed frontiers. Worrying was for those who knew the risks. In that moment, Will felt he might be both at once, and it was good.

Because things were where they were supposed to be.

“Alright, what *do* we know?”

Jack Crawford disliked being wrong about things. It questioned not only his abilities, but his integrity. He especially disliked lots of people knowing he was wrong about something; as in, a nations worth of people. Most of all, he hated his boss knowing that lots of people knew he was wrong about something.

When he was *this* wrong about something, it was just a washout, the cause and effect of which was rippling out to touch dozens of others. He knew Reba McLane would probably have grounds for a complaint. The public and the media were being kept in the dark for as long as was humanly possible.

Then, of course Will Graham...

Jack Crawford really fucking hated being wrong about things.

That god damn news interview fucked us all up the ass, Jack thought as Zeller fired up the projector and began walking them through what they had, *and now we're going to have to walk funny for a little while. Until we find this guy. Find him and bag him, once and for all.*

Lecter was another issue. A big damn issue, depending on how this went. Jack could only imagine the chaos that would ensue if they lost Hannibal Lecter to the wilds. *Kiss your job goodbye, Crawford*, he told himself. Then he stopped thinking about it. Wallowing in self pity wasn't going to get him anywhere fast.

Right now, Brian Zeller didn't have the gall to look sheepish or try and talk his way out of their sticky situation. At the very least, Crawford appreciated that. Right now, they needed pragmatism more than anything.

"We know how he managed to leave his van for us to find *and* get away from the house after he set the fire," Zeller said as he clicked open a tab on the projected screen, "Lang, the service station attendant, he took his truck. Made him hook it up to Dolarhyde's van and then killed the poor bastard, locked up the service station and towed it to his house. Left it in a dirt road far out behind the fields, opposite of the way we came in.

"He sets the fire, McLane's upstairs chloroformed. When she wakes up, *boom* he blows Lang's head off as a show for McLane, and then he's got a straight run to the truck out back and he's gone."

"We know that's right because he left the truck parked at the Baltimore Asylum when he turned up for his job," Jimmy Price added, sitting slouched in his chair, face dejected in the way only a scientist with the wrong conclusion could be, "I found his prints on the tail-bar and the steering wheel. Cocky bastard doesn't care that we know he's alive."

"Any word from Chilton about the cock up?" Jack didn't hide the utter contempt in his voice.

"Says he hires PEO's from G4S all the time," Bev said, "and I'll be frank, it doesn't surprise me that Dolarhyde found this an easy switch. G4S are notorious for under-training their employees. Most won't even know each other by sight, and they're lax with procedures. From what we can tell, Dolarhyde got hold of one of their employees," she checked her sheet, "Grant Adamson. He's missing, has been for twenty one hours, and was due to escort Lecter. We think Dolarhyde has killed or incapacitated him, stolen the uniform, and replaced him on the transfer.

"He killed the other officers with a knife, one to the throat and the other was stabbed five times in the chest. Then somehow Dolarhyde got the driver to stop the van; it was parked, not

crashed. Once that was done, the two medics vacated the cab, we found them on the road shot with the gun from one of the other officers. The other gun is still missing, so he's armed. The driver was last, by the looks of it.

"One plus?" She added, "We didn't find Lecter's blood at the scene. He's missing, but Dolarhyde didn't harm him, at least not at first. What he's done with him since then, we don't know."

"Any chance he let Lecter loose?"

"There's always the possibility," Zeller said as he loosened his tie and scratched at his neck, "but then none of Lecter's restraints were found at the scene either. No straight jacket, no face mask, no leg cuffs. It's an assumption, but something tells me he wants Lecter for something else."

"Also we've had no reports of missing vehicles," Bev continued, "so we're still unsure of how Dolarhyde's transporting them. What can I say, G4S was a big risk. Of course, they're cheap," Beverly said acidly, "which must have appealed to Chilton I'm sure."

"Course it did," Jack said curtly, "stupid bastard. This goes south, I'm pinning this shit storm on that incompetent fool, no two ways about it. He won't wriggle out of this one," there was a pause, while Jack collected himself and everyone looked elsewhere, "alright, take me back to the house. What else do we have?"

"We think he might have even had Lang's body on a chair that he tipped, to simulate the sound of a falling body," Beverly Katz interjected as she picked up a paper report, "turns out Lang had no teeth. He was a perfect patsy, so to speak. The key around his neck that Dolarhyde engineered, that was just to force Reba to search the body. Make sure she confirmed he was dead."

"Right. Alright. And the teeth?"

"His grandmother's," Zeller said, pushing a stapled few sheets Jack's way; Crawford picked them up.

A report from the Smithsonian: *Upper plate, vulcanite. Unusual and anachronistic substance, replaced since by acrylic. Not in use for fifty years.*

"We confirmed it," Zeller continued, "Located Ned Vogt, the stepson of Dolarhyde's mother. He said he met Mrs Dolarhyde once when he was a kid and never forgot the teeth."

"The metal hip joint?" Jack asked with a sigh.

"There wasn't enough left of it by the time the fire was through and done with. That explosion wiped out quite a lot of the evidence. Dolarhyde had a locker of dynamite in the basement. Went off like a depth charge once the fire ate through the box. Lucky Will had Reba out of there. Went off about five minutes after they carted the two of them to hospital."

"Then we have just enough to hang ourselves with," Jack said, rubbing his eyes.

Silence. They stared at each other over the messy table like reprimanded school children being forced sit in the corner and think about what they had done.

“Has Will called?” Bev asked, looking at her watch, “He should have landed half an hour ago.”

“Maybe you’d better give him a call?” Jack offered; Bev stood and left the room, fishing in her pocket for her phone, “I don’t think I’m his favourite person right now.”

“How’d he take it?” Brian asked, fixing Jack with a stare.

“He was calm, quiet and reasonable. Which means he’s fucking pissed. If Dolarhyde had taken anyone but Lecter, I don’t think he would have even agreed to come back. That’s how I see it.”

“Well then, lucky for us it is Lecter,” Jimmy said, tipping his head in a shrug; all eyes looked to him, “because now we can be sure Will’s going to find him no matter what.”

Washing his hands still left the grey smudges apparent. Mucky little marks on the stretch of skin between his fingers and his thumb. He dried his hand on the hand towel before pulling it off the rail and dumping it in the laundry.

Hannibal found him as he was searching for another in the bedroom cupboard.

“We’re down for the twentieth,” he informed Will as he disappeared into the walk-in wardrobe.

Will took a moment, thinking, “Is this for the Grant’s dinner?”

“Of course.”

“I’d really rather not. They’re...” Will paused, picking up a yellow towel and scrunching it between his fingers; there was a moment of déjà vu. He liked the feeling, even as it prickled, “You won’t enjoy yourself, neither will I. So why are we going?”

“Because Mr. Gregory Grant’s daughter donated a large sum of money to the unit at St. James, and Marissa expects us to attend.”

“Marissa? Your boss is coming?” Will asked, looking up as Hannibal re-emerged carrying a navy blue suit in one hand, an off cream shirt in the other.

“Naturally,” Hannibal said as he laid out his clothes on the king size bed; the yellow of the bedspread clashed with the blue horribly. Will gestured to the clothes.

“So you’re going to Kalstein’s talk on genetics tonight? I thought you said he was a small minded man that spouted bullshit.”

“I feel you are paraphrasing me. And I was invited. It would be rude not to.”

“Well if you do, please don’t insult him like last time. I had to put up with his sister on my case for weeks. Anyway, what was I saying before? Right, your boss. I thought you’d never talk to her again after she complained about your pork at dinner the other month. What did she say? ‘Dry as a desert’? Something like that.”

“Only a true artist accepts criticism.”

“And only someone who can’t accept criticism makes statements about accepting criticism.”

“You always slide the knife in so sweetly,” Hannibal smiled, eyes catching the light impishly as he watched Will hover nearby.

“Someone has to.”

“I quite agree. Now, the twentieth,” Hannibal approached him, catching him by the waist, “Shall I go alone?”

“Course not,” Will waved away the suggestion and slung the towel over his arm, “couldn’t stand the thought of you stuck there bored out of your skull. I’ll just have to suck it up, I suppose. Do you want me to find something from the cellar to take along?”

“Nothing from the vintage. Perhaps a Merlot? I believe they’re serving duck.”

“You’re the boss.”

And then suddenly they were close enough that the nose came into play. Will watched as Hannibal almost-closed his eyes, leaning in only slightly as if to lift the delicate fragrance from the air. Their eyes caught each other like barbed hooks; Will wished to look away, only he could not.

“You have been to the shooting range.”

“I...yeah,” Will said with a sigh, thinking of the gunpowder smudges on his hands, “just in the mood, I guess.”

“Stressed? I didn’t realise you had that much on your mind.”

“It’s nothing. Just work. I suppose no one wants to publish only ‘semi-specific glances into the subject matter’.”

“My dearest,” Hannibal tutted through a wicked smile, “are you to make a statement about accepting criticisms? I hope not. I know you cannot accept them.”

“Oh, whisper sweet nothings to me,” Will said sarcastically.

“I would not dare to whisper the troubles of the one I love.”

“Not troubles, just...” Will frowned, “becoming a little difficult to feel useless all the time.”

“All the time?” Hannibal raised a brow.

Will gave a one shoulder shrug and subconsciously shifted closer, “I used to have a place. I used to have a job that let me know what I was for. Now...now I’m adrift; a ship on the sea. I suppose I’m just afraid of running aground.”

“There is no chance of that, surely?” Hannibal whispered, leaning closer, the words caressing the shell of his ear.

“Are you my starry night sky?” Will smiled, “Shall I look up to find my way back home?”

He’d expected a kiss, not the sudden savaging his neck received. Hannibal had always been a slippery one when it came to expectations. Will knew his mate enjoyed it; the unpredictability. He felt himself go weak at the knees, clinging to Hannibal as the man sank his teeth near to breaking point at the joint of neck and shoulder.

“Hannibal,” Will keened involuntarily; when the teeth receded, a tongue lapped at the abused flesh. Will stayed close, fingers curling in and out of Hannibal’s silk shirt, a little breathless, “we should accept unwanted dinner invitations more often.”

Hannibal laughed, a soft rumble in his chest that passed to Will as a welcome vibration. Sex had always been an oddity between them; he knew his mate treated it as a game. After a time Will had come to accept that laying in wait until the subject was unsuspecting, that was the lure to Hannibal’s libido. Will’s reaction was his foreplay. The sex was almost inconsequential, but for the fact that the hedonist in Hannibal clearly enjoyed the pleasure it gave.

And then there were the times when something just set him off. No games, no long, drawn out machinations, no power trips. Just sheer, unmitigated attraction.

As Will pulled away and started unbuttoning his shirt, walking backwards towards the bed as he held Hannibal’s ravenous stare, he thought this might be one of those times.

“When do you have to be at this talk?” he asked through half lidded eyes.

“I...” Hannibal stalled; Will knew he had him. The man was rarely without words.

His shirt fell half off one shoulder, still clinging to him loosely. Will undid his fly and let his trousers hang loose on his hips. When Will crawled up onto the bed, he thought he might have seen Hannibal’s nostrils flare.

“Stay?” Will asked, letting his legs splay as he leaned up on his elbows.

“How could I refuse you?” Hannibal asked, walking as slowly as his need would allow.

Talk of others fell to the wayside, as they lost themselves in each other. Will knew the doubt would always be there, that his choices had been misguided or wrong. But that, in the end, he need only look up to his night sky.

“Hannibal?”

“Mmm?” said through a mouthful of skin.

“Fuck me till I can’t remember my own name?”

“Your wish,” Hannibal jerked Will to him violently, “my command.”

The Mid America Arms smelled of chill metal, gunpowder from the test range, and stale carpet. It sported a long, glass counter, behind which stood a burly man with a handlebar moustache and a tattoo at his neck that didn’t match his red, generic employee’s uniform.

“You need ammo for that too?” he asked.

“I’ll take a box of .38’s,” Will said, looking down the sight of the Glock he’d picked out from the pistols; having to go on the flight dry had been a drawback, but luckily it seemed as easy to pick up a weapon in Missouri as it was in Florida. He lowered the pistol and put it on the counter, “and I need a shotgun.”

“Ok,” the man was peremptory and didn’t seem the type to pry; Will was attesting that to his FBI badge which he’d flopped on the counter when he’d entered, “how much stopping power you looking for?”

“Enough to push back a man that could lift me without breaking a sweat. And slick. I need a fast repeat. Accurate as you can.”

“You want a Winchester SX3,” the seller said, reaching up with both hands to lift down a long, black single barrel, “it’s automatic, pump action. You don’t get a faster rack-up this side of Texas. Accurate as an auto can be, but the hunters seem to favour it so that must mean something. Comes in 12 gauge, that aughta take care of what you’re after, Agent,” he handed it over, “here.”

Will took the gun from the man’s hands, turning to lift it and take aim, the stock fitting snugly into his right shoulder. He thought about what firing it would feel like, *the kick jabbing back into the weak spot where the sniper bullet had ripped straight through.* Still, if it only took one shot he wouldn’t have to worry about incapacitating himself.

He looked through the sights, imagining the bulk of an unknown man in front of him like a silhouette on a shooting range.

He...he knows you made me lie, Will Graham. Because I was forced to lie, He will be more...more merciful to me than he will be with you, Will Graham.

“I’ll take them both.”

The sun was almost down by the time he found the turn off for Forest Park from the I-64, his rental car turning sluggishly. It was dark out on the interstate, the park looming to his right like a vast maw. The zoo sat nestled inside, like a lair for some fairy tale monster. The strips

of summer sunlight set the few clouds on fire, red embers. Will wondered if the Dragon preferred the idea of the dark, hiding, *being unseen*, or if that was Dolarhyde's half.

The Red Dragon; Will imagined it was something which wished to be seen, to be admired, witnessed in awe.

...the Dragon is merciful... He...had helped me understand...His splendour and I will praise Him...

A bloody deity living inside a hovel like Francis Dolarhyde. *Do you feel unworthy?* Will asked Dolarhyde, *Does it resent you? It controls you and you let it, right? Because you're not worthy. Probably never have been.*

As he turned into the park the darkness swamped him. He drove and drove and didn't see another car. It felt like *going the wrong way.* Only, there was no right or wrong way. Not now. Not when the Dragon had taken...

When he reached the locked gates, Will stopped the car and turned out the lights. He took the shotgun shells and put them in his right jacket pocket, the three clips for the Glock and stuffed them in his left. The Glock went into his side arm holster. He kept the shotgun in his hand, held vertically by the stock.

Knowing the Dragon; he felt like he did not know enough, from the scraps he'd picked through, childhood, medical, a glimpse through the eyes of his victims. Dangerous to be ignorant. *You're not ready for this. Not ready. Being unprepared gets people killed, you know that.* Yet something in him shrugged and pointed out the obvious:

Will had known Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He'd known him, perhaps better than it was sane to know a man so far gone. He had slipped into his head through the back door, by way of the man's need to slaughter girls as gory simulacra of his beloved daughter. *Honour them.* Will remembered knowing Hobbs. Knowing him inside out, until it was difficult to tell where Hobbs ended and he began.

And then he remembered turning up at the man's front porch to find his wife choking her last, face down on the steps. Remembered walking into the kitchen just as the grinning lunatic had slit his daughter's throat, before Will had gunned him down until his finger was clicking the empty barrel round and round and round. Remembered trying futilely to stem the nauseous tide of red blood gushing from Abigail Hobbs' throat as she gasped under his hands and stared at him as if pleading without words for him to save her.

Will had known exactly who Garrett Jacob Hobbs was, but it hadn't helped him to stop the man from massacring his entire family. Just as much as Will knowing who the Dragon was wouldn't stop him from torturing and killing Hannibal Lecter.

Fear, that's all it was. The dark nipped at him and the unfamiliar weight of the shotgun pulled at his arm. The thought that knowing the Dragon would prepare him gave him something to cling to. *The fear came from knowing that he couldn't cling to anything, that he had to let go if this had a chance of working*. The fear was healthy, kept him sharp, made him cautious. When it came down to it, fear might be a safer weapon than those he'd bought at the store.

When he looked up the sky was overcast, a dark mass above with no light visible; no stars by which to find his way.

Will swallowed and pushed his shotgun through the bars of the gate, before beginning his climb.

Beverly Katz felt the world might be unfair to most. Rarely, there was a ray of sunshine, but nearly everyone she knew had to scrabble for it. It never opened up the clouds in the sky and shone down in a swathe of ease and prosperity.

What was worse was having it, only to lose it. Most worked for their happy endings, and some weren't capable of believing when it had been lost to the dark pitfalls that littered life.

"Found him," Zeller said as he leaned around the doorway behind her.

"Where?"

"Miami International airport. Got a ticket for St. Louis," Brian turned and walked, trailing Beverly, "Was a bitch to find. He didn't use a credit card. Paid in cash."

"Shit. He knows something."

"Yeah. Something he's keeping to himself. I've sent his face to St. Louis PD, they're keeping an eye out for him"

"Then you think he might...god, I don't know. What the hell is he doing?"

"Want my opinion?" Zeller asked as they weaved around four tightly clustered phlebotomists in the hallway, talking heatedly.

"I don't know," Bev said cautiously, "do I?"

"You ever wondered if Will might just want this over with?"

"You think he's *suicidal*?" Beverly said incredulously, "Come on."

"Actually that wasn't what I meant."

"Then what?" she asked as they walked through the double doors of the board room they'd holed up in; Jack was in the corner, talking quietly into his phone, face hard.

Zeller turned, hands on his hips and a shrug in his shoulders, "That he might want Lecter out of the picture, once and for all."

"Kill him. You mean kill him, right?"

"Would beat living chained to an alpha he'll never be free of."

“Don’t talk shit, Brian. I don’t need it. Hell,” she shook her head, “someone would think you hadn’t known Will Graham for six years. Will couldn’t hurt Lecter any more than Lecter could hurt Will.”

“Yeah?” Brian shook his head, “I’d say both of those assumptions are up in the air. Lecter’s a remorseless sadist, and it takes one to know one.”

“Will never knew about...”

“He says he didn’t know. Who knows what he knew.”

“That’s horseshit.”

“Want to know what I really think?” Zeller raised his voice a little, face stern, “I think Graham’s a broken man that we did bad things to. Three years he’s been suffering alone under the pull of his other half. Must hurt, right, losing a bonded partner? I can only imagine the torture it must be if they aren’t even *dead*. Just gone. Gone like a limb sliced off but kept alive in a lab somewhere. Eating and eating away at what little sanity he had before this all started. That’s where I see Will Graham.”

“Christ, you’re a piece of work.”

“Starling didn’t argue with me. She said we should put officers out scouting any gun stores in St. Louis. Thinks Will’s on the hunt, just like I do.”

“But who for?” Bev argued.

“Will you two take it outside?” Jack bit out, turning savagely.

“Sorry,” Bev said as they sidled out.

The doors whapped shut like slaps, battering against her calm. Beverly had always liked Will. He was sharp but humorous, kind but capable of doing what needed doing. And Brian was right, in a way, because Will was unpredictable too, so much so that someone could believe him capable of stone cold murder if they wished. Most of all, she saw him as fragile, a terribly fragile man who’d been unknowingly tossed into the bull pen.

She hoped they found him first.

The air was quick with darkness; it moved about before his eyes like dancing ants. He was too cautious to turn on his flashlight. Instead he used his hand to feel for the walls and a box of matches to light the signs he came across. He thought he could smell the animals on the air; hot fur and latent power. The scent of predator's locked in cages, watching him as he shuffled blindly.

Does it come at night, in the guise of light, and feel for death in its horn’s delight? Will felt the rhyme trip about in his mind. The Dragon wanted to consume; was the painting was

symbolic or testimonial? Lecter must have fascinated him, with his unerring ability to understand what it meant to truly appreciate your victim. *Honouring through fine dining.* Will licked his lips and bowed his head for a moment, taking a long, deep breath.

Keep it together, he told himself, *keep it together.*

What if you're too late? He asked himself. It gave him pause only for a few seconds, before he lifted his head and started forwards again, shuffling softly as he could. *What if he's already started? What if he's already done?*

A match hissing to flare as if to scare the shadows away: Veterinary Services, the sign read. Will paused, staring at the yellow sign. Reba had said that Dolarhyde had taken her to see the tiger while it was out cold to get a tooth removed. He licked his lips and watched the sign stutter and die as the match flickered out. It burnt down too far and singed his fingers, causing him to drop it with a swift inhale.

The first right hand corner he took faced him with nothing but further darkness. Will listened keenly. No sound but for the rustling of tree branches in the wind. His world was nothing but touch, scent and sound. It moved around him like a mocking beast. An owl hooted somewhere far off to his right. His own heartbeat, when he focused keenly enough, kept the rhythm of his body in time with the world. His footsteps were difficult to mask, forcing him to move slowly.

Then something caught his eye. Will stalled, snapping his head to the right and pulling into the wall. He held his breath until he knew he felt calm. *Beating hearts let you know you were alive*. Will leaned around the corner of the wall and stared.

A window lit from the inside, spilling out flaccid yellow light. It appeared unreal in this dark landscape, alone and inviting. The illumination was not vast, only enough to reveal a few ferns, the gutter above the window, a small path and a gate, open but for the loose chain hanging between its bars. He watched for a few minutes to make sure no one was waiting. Then Will approached. When he reached the chain he bent down to inspect the end; *sheared through with bolt cutters.* Will took a deep breath and stood up, shotgun still heavy in his right hand.

Leaving the pool of light seemed conducive to panic but Will kept his focus. Slipping down the path he stayed silent, kept into the building with its low roof. He lit a match and its sound was akin to a dull roar against his heightened senses.

The door was there. There it was. Will tried the handle and the door swung open, pouring out further light. He blinked into the well lit corridor, unassuming in its workplace-green. *Don't hesitate, don't falter, don't fear.* Will knew they were impossible ethics to follow.

A faint hint on the air, a smell he could not mistake...

Will stepped inside and pulled the door to behind him.

It was difficult, being proactive when you were anxious. She was sure she would have flubbed at some point, if she hadn't spent the last four years of her life preparing for feeling just like she did now. *Feeling like she did and yet being able to perform her duty, because kicking up a storm wouldn't help anyone*.

Not going to throw it all away now, she thought angrily. Honestly, she was amazed by how irate she was. Will Graham had no right to throw this all away, that was what she thought. He had no right to take what little he had left and offer it to the Dragon on a platter. *Because he's one of the few who understands, and that's a rare thing in this world*.

"Anyone checked his phone records?" Starling asked.

"Phone records, shit, hang on," Crawford said, cursing uncharacteristically, "I can get you them now."

She held back a tight sigh. Seemed like she was one of the few following procedure. She knew Jack had a hell of a lot on his plate right now, and was being pulled in five different directions by his subordinates and his superiors, but that was his job. Right now, Starling didn't question feeling superior. She would take what few chances she got to bolster her ego.

"Ah Christ," Jack said; she could almost see him shaking his head.

"Jack?"

"He called St Louis General. Ward six."

"Reba McLane," Starling said, "right. I'll get on her, she might be able to tell us where he's gone."

"Knowing Will, he'll have asked her to keep it quiet. Do what you need to do, Clarice, understand me?"

"I understand."

She wanted to see Will alive. She wanted to see him alive so she could beat some sense into him, literally. She wanted to beat some sense into him so he knew what it meant to leave a little girl behind and go off and get yourself killed chasing a dream of justice. She wanted him to know what it meant to be left all alone with nothing but a wish to see your father come back through that door, eyes smiling.

Her father's partner had been the one to come to the door, taking off his hat and bending down to her height, face solemn. 'I'm sorry, Clarice,' he'd said, 'I'm sorry I couldn't bring him back for you.'

All she could think as she closed her eyes and dialed St. Louis General was that she'd make sure Reba gave her what they needed. *While all she could promise herself was that if Dolarhyde took Eleanor's father away, she would kill him. Kill him dead.*

He followed the smell because it was all he had. Winchester raised, pointing gun-dog straight, twitching at imagined sounds. *Stay calm and we all come out of this alive*. Will hated his own attempts at stopping the fear. *There was no point.*

The smell was powerful here, the further he stepped. That powerful musk that sent his nerves tingling. Will tried to keep his calm, tried to take his time. *His biology wished to sabotage his training.*

The corridor was long, maybe the length of the building. He couldn't be sure. The pale green paint was muted by a grey rubber floor. His shoes squeaked lightly with every step, making him wince. Will tried the first door on his right: locked. *The smell was more here.* The second on his right: locked. *And more.* Third on his left: open. *God, he must be close.*

He pushed it open with his foot and checked his sights. The room was a little dimmer than the corridor, revealing through the doorway a large steel operating table, surrounded by familiar machinery and clean white walls shrouded grey in gloom, all umbrella-d under a massive movable light which glowed on its lowest setting.

His instincts told him not to, but his senses took over when he saw...

Hannibal, inert, eyes closed, prone and still, laid out like a corpse on an undertaker's table.

"Jesus," he breathed, lowering the shotgun as he rushed inside, "Hannibal..."

The lights went out, and his sight dissolved to a useless sense. Will tripped to a halt and froze. All around him, *all around him.* His heart was hammering in his chest. *Idiot,* was all he had the time to think, *you fucking idiot!*

A chink of metal; he spun, pulling up the shotgun but unwilling to fire without a target. He knew he'd wreck his shoulder as soon as the first cartridge was spent. He wanted the first shot to count, because a second and third might be out of the picture.

Breathing; he backed up until he could feel a large machine at his back. Blind and useless, Will kept his breathing as even as he could. *Was the breathing his own, or another's?* He panic-considered dumping the shotgun and pulling out his pistol, only he remembered Hobbs taking the full clip and still clinging to life. He needed the shotgun. *The sound of someone moving, shuffling against a surface.*

He backed up until he hit the steel operating table. He'd seen Dolarhyde's description. The man looked like he'd take a full rack of auto-shotgun 12 gauges and still keep coming. Will reached out behind him and felt for the soft skin he knew would be there, just to know, just to accept when he felt...

Nothing. No cold body on the slab. No warm body either. *No nothing*.

He swallowed and the pit of his stomach dropped out.

Suddenly the darkness was full of monsters.

Will could only say one thing...

“No.”

...before the arm wrapped around him from the side.

Impulse: he fired the shotgun, sending a static bang ricocheting around the room. His shoulder screamed in agony and the gun dropped as his arm went momentarily numb from the rip.

But the lightning-flash illumination had been given to him like a frame from a film, caught in eternity. For a split second Will was shown what waited in the gloom. A towering man stood to his right, his face obscured by a video camera. *Filming in infra-red:* Will remembered Reba say. *watching him like a predator from the darkness, like he'd watched the Leeds and the Jacobis.*

But he couldn’t stop there. Couldn’t focus. Couldn’t *believe.* Because as his pulse skipped about like sand on a beaten drum-skin he knew what else he had seen. In his peripheral vision: a familiar sight. *Tall in stature, graceful in poise, even in features.*

He was given enough time to say, “Hannibal,” before there was someone holding him from the right, massive hands like a fairy tale giant, one around his neck squeezing, the other around his frozen arm. His skin twisted, the stitches at his neck straining. He thought he felt something rip. The steel table dug into his back, trapping him tightly.

“Hold still,” the voice spoke as if through a roaring lion; Will blanched at the sound, even as it slurred badly on the ‘s’.

Still he choked and struggled, writhing like a fish on a line, pulling in his left hand to try and reach for his Glock in its holster. When his hand was caught and held warmly by unseen hands he couldn’t help but sob; it was lost to the strangle, crushing his windpipe tightly. Will cried out in pain as his right arm was wrenched. The scent was overpowering, *the smell that made him want to do nothing but smile and open his arms.*

And then *he* spoke, as if it were a Sunday morning and they had woken early, and Hannibal was slightly out of sorts because, well, it was before eleven and his mate preferred a late rise and Will knew he would lean in and kiss his eyes closed and say 'go back to sleep' and Hannibal would say...

“I knew you'd find me, my keen little mongoose. Ah, now. Shh, don’t move,” Hannibal said as Will fell still at the command, “This will not be quick, and I do not wish you to feel any pain. Such a long time, and absence makes the heart grow fonder, no? My darling, how I have missed you.”

The words emerged from the darkness, juxtaposed, calm and devastating. Hannibal spoke so close that Will thought he might be able to see him, even though in reality all he could see was an after effect of the shotgun’s flash; everything was still swamped in pitch. His left arm was pulled up and there was a sudden but obvious pain in his armpit as something stabbed in deep.

“In a moment you will be light headed, then drowsy. Don’t resist. So gentle, like slipping into a warm bath.”

Will whimpered and felt his head swim, the pain become a confused scramble, his comprehension lessened, his world slipped, his breathing shortened.

“I regret it came to this Will. But every game has its ending.”

Will closed his eyes and could barely understand why the darkness stayed. *One reality shifting to another.* As he was laid back upon the slab, he thought he could hear Hannibal’s voice following him down into the pit.

“My remarkable darling, I do admire your courage. I think I’ll eat your heart.”

Chapter End Notes

All I can do is say, this isn't the end, not yet. There is more to come.

Also I just wanted to say thank you so much to everyone who has commented or left kudos. I have been pleasantly surprised by how popular this story has been. I love to tell stories, but sharing a story is its purpose and I love to know that it's made an impact. Thank you all, darlings, and I promise not to leave you hanging on this cliff for too long.

Warm, Soft, Deep

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This felt like climbing. *It was a struggle to reach further up and up.* Clawing for anything but the crumbling feeling. *His mind felt raw.* That was wrong. *Wrong. You left me there.* I was always there with you, right? *You were there with me even though we were* gone, gone, gone.

Wake up Will Graham, your life has requested an audience.

His eyes pulled open like stuck blinds; all half shuttered and twisted together. A mess of dim bulbs and soft sounds greeted him as he gripped and grabbed his way back. *Back to the place he did not wish to return to.* His life had become the play, and his view of the lights above a stage backdrop.

The face to *exit stage right*: Hannibal stood with a pair of blue, latex gloves in his hands. While he spoke, he shimmied his hands into the tight material, stretching out the fingers as if filling a limp prop.

“The meat takes on the taste, an acid flavour that seeps out with the brain’s perception of terror,” he was saying; the large light overhead was soft and yet still it hurt his eyes, “careful preparation is essential.”

His eyes fluttered but his body was still. His legs felt a thousand miles away, as if no longer attached. His body was cold. His arms did not respond. Will tried to speak, but his throat muscles refused. *No time for screaming*.

He had heard people talk about out of body experiences. Floating from your skin to observe everything that happened, almost as if it were happening to someone else. Will had always wondered if it was less a religious experience and more a built in escape plan; an emergency exit for the mind when the body was too terrible a place to be. Only he was sure he would have felt it by now, *a lightness of being, an escape, a way out.* Surely, by now, he would have felt himself float free.

No exit. No escape. No easy way out for you. *Just reality kicking in, a blunt hit to the face.* And that face, from *exit stage left,* spoke his lines:

“I’d like to taste that,” the lion’s voice, rough and hoarse and rumbling.

The players in their places, and he between them. *The unknown guest.* Why are you here, Will? It asked him. What have you done? He wanted to turn. He needed to see. Will tried to remember the wavering near-past-almost-present. It evaded his grasp, a scrap of paper in the wind.

Hands on him.

His neck, twisted, bleeding.

His head light.

My gun, he remembered blearily, *they didn't take my gun.*

"As one who has never tasted fear, I would not deny you," Hannibal said, tipping his head to the right as his left hand snapped inside the glove, "a unique experience must be savoured, even if the meal itself is unsavoury."

Then they were on him, like a spider sensing its prey as the silk lines were tugged: maroon eyes sharp with playfulness. Hannibal smiled at him gently.

"Don't you agree, Will?" he was asked; then the eyes skipped up to the Dragon as he loomed forwards. Will could make out shaggy blonde hair, sharp blue eyes and a mouth that seemed split open, "Will has always understood the need for violence, only I find he has a difficult time appreciating it."

Will stared as his vision began to clear. He tried to feel, tried to lift his head, even if all he could think of was...

Were you putting the knife down? Were you pulling it right? Is this full circle, Hannibal? Is this the end of the cyclical run? Would I ever have been able to escape?

Eleanor. Will managed a soft *hnnh*, a sound of an animal in pain. All alone. You left her. *You left me. I left you.* Everyone leaves. Will blinked slowly as the pain welled. Ellie, please forgive me honey. Maybe someday you'll know what it means to love someone enough to risk everything. Maybe. God, I hope you do, I hope you can, because I can't stand that you might hate me for the rest of...

Suddenly Lecter held a pair of shining scissors in his hand. Carefully, he could feel him cut, *could feel the cold metal against his abdomen*, and hear the shear of cloth shorn. Down his arms, along his chest, up through the neck line. A slight chill to his skin as Hannibal cut away his shirt and jacket, through his holster, peeling him out of it like a ripe fruit. He heard his pistol placed aside on a metal surface, and his heart rate picked up.

Confusion: remembering lying back as Hannibal undressed him carefully while Will laughed low in his throat.

"Oh?" Hannibal had asked as he pulled open Will's shirt, his fingers tracing the skin, "I always find you laughing at inappropriate moments. Do you find this amusing?"

"Prurient," Will had said between the soft sounds, "chastely prurient. Just like you."

A feeling like tearing; *of cloth or your mind?* Will couldn't answer because he couldn't stop thinking: *I'm going to die here. Right here, in this lonely place. I'm going to die here.* The thought stuck, bottled up all the others rising like hazy webs on a hot breeze. It was a show stopper. A stopped show. *Oh god, oh god please...*

Jack. Will wondered, closing his eyes as unconscious tears formed and spilled, what would Jack think when he found him? Would Hannibal display him? Would he become a twisted artwork in the Doctor's resume? *Would you be a Botticelli or a Leonardo?* He hoped he was at least something tasty. *His mind swam.* Seemed a waste otherwise.

There was a pause. Eyes open once more. The Dragon leaned closer, his eyes coming into Will's bleary focus: they locked together and Will wished he could look away. *Hunger and pain*. He saw it deep inside, behind the blocked up wall of utter disassociation in the Dragon's stare.

"Is there something you require?" Hannibal asked clinically.

"He does not know, you were right," the Dragon spoke; his breath was hot and heavy, slightly putrid. Will wished he could gag as it washed over his face, "I want to make him understand."

"It is a human need," Hannibal said, reaching out with a gloved hand to stroke Will's hair, the glove sticky against the strands, "and one must always follow their needs."

Despite his incapacitation, Will could feel his panic physically manifest; his chest moved up and down, then faster, more rapid as his breathing heightened in alarm. The Dragon lunged with the speed and ferocity of a bear, taking hold of him by the right shoulder, shaking him. The pain was dull, but Will could feel the metal pins that held his shattered clavicle together grind around as the age old bullet wound lit up like a Christmas tree. The damage done by the shotgun shone through. *Something had been opened up.*

Will thought he might have frozen completely, his eyes wide in fear. *You'll let him*, he thought in panic as he held Hannibal's stare, *Jesus you'll let him.* A set of teeth like mangled talons emerged from behind ruined lips to the unpleasant sound of two pieces of meat being pealed apart.

A slight sensation ran through his nerves. *He could feel the air against his shoulders.* Enough to make Will's jaw slack. *Fuck, Jesus fuck.* Eyes skipping back and forth, between the man atop him, and the man who watched from above, eyes alight with delight.

He couldn't see the Dragon as he leaned in, *and it made his nerves sing.* He couldn't see where he was going, just the side of his head disappearing out of sight. When the Dragon bit into Will's right pectoral, Will wished he could scream. All that emerged was a strangled choke as his neck muscles strained on impulse, his blood rushed and he wished he believed that they wouldn't make this long and slow.

He hadn't expected it, the intensity of the pain, as everything had felt so muted and dulled. A white hot agony and pressure as the man crunched down, almost splitting through the skin, the elasticity pulling and stretching, and then a horrifying tearing feeling, filled with a gush all of its own...

"Tell me," Lecter asked as Will panted through his nose and the red hot liquid flowed out and down, "did your heart race when you killed Miss Lounds?"

Will watched the Dragon pull back into view, licking at his teeth and lips. The gore mixed with stringy saliva. A beaded, red strand dangled from his chin. Will stared at the ceiling, blinking. *Must be a way out,* as the agony pulsed, *must be a way out. Think, think, think think think think...*

Pain was a motivator. Will knew it, had known and understood just how true it was ever since he'd been a cop before his work with the FBI. The threat of pain was a de-motivator, it made people freeze, made them sink down to the ground, made them fearful. He'd seen it in robberies, hold ups. Most times the threat of a gun or a knife was all it took to have someone crumble. But the application of pain...that was a different story.

It made people want to lash back.

"She was not worthy of a true death," the Dragon slurred, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, "she understood in the end what it was to know me. Do you, Dr. Lecter?"

"I am always open to new experiences, much as you yourself," Hannibal smiled with the right side of his mouth as he placed the scissors down with a soft clink, "knowledge is power, and power is entirely arbitrary. He who has it, has it. He who does not, is at the bottom of the food chain. Knowledge allows us," Hannibal once more found Will's lifeless gaze, "to recognise our design."

The light hurt. His chest hurt. His nerves rang like church bells, jangling his mind and yet...

Hannibal stared at him as he spoke. It was too difficult to look away, even as he seethed and the Dragon paced by his side. *Do you see?* Will wanted to ask, *Do you see?*

"You must understand," Hannibal said, eyes still upon him, "that blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance. Just as the source of light is burning."

"Burning cleanses," the Dragon growled, "this monster doesn't deserve to be cleansed. Lounds begged for it in the end, to be *saved.* This one, huh, he's the kind of man that sits on a perch and dangles his toes in the black water before drying off his feet when he feels like it."

Will listened as Dolarhyde grew agitated, out of sight, *so much worse when he couldn't see him*; It was fear, pure fear. Will wished he could just *see him*, his footsteps thumping and his breath huffing, "He's nothing but a churlish little hypocrite."

When Will looked right Lecter was gone. Will blinked and tried to move his head. *The slightest movement, the smallest pull of muscles.* It didn't help, but the control over his body, however small, made his heart slow somewhat with calm.

What appeared when Lecter returned undid the effect.

"When I was placed in the Baltimore State Asylum," Hannibal said, inspecting a bright scalpel in his right hand as if it were a rare bird, "I would often fall into my own fantasies. A palace all of my own, with which to follow any whim. An escape, one might say. It could be posited that I was more free there than I have ever been outside of a cage. And yet there is always something missing from pure thought; a need for physical motion, the resistance of

another's force. The feeling of reality that comes from just the right amount," once again he stared at Will, "of pressure on the skin. Do you know, Will, how much it takes? Of course you do. One hundred pounds per square inch before the cutis ruptures."

There was a familiar feel, a sense of déjà vu, when Hannibal lifted Will's left hand with his own, interlacing their fingers. Will stared at him, *stared at him as he* stared at Will's hand. A niggling sense of tenderness hid in Hannibal's eyes. The pale line that had always been on his ring finger was no longer visible, tanned over by the hot Miami sun.

"I miss the little things," Hannibal almost-whispered, just loud enough, "the memories of our life together. Do you still own it?" he asked, stroking his finger gently, "Or did you throw it into the ocean? I wonder. I wish I could give you back the time that was stolen from us, but it is impossible. You left me there, dearest. Left me to rot."

Maybe, he thought as the pain screamed and Hannibal sliced into the flesh of his ring finger, maybe it was always meant to be this. Will closed his eyes and felt the scalpel wrap around, cutting through delicately once at the base, again and again and again. The pain was almost secondary, through the misting fever of the moment. His throat choked in involuntary sympathy for his nerves as they were slit through, saliva spat up onto his face, feeling the aching panic that came from restriction of breath.

"Would you?" Hannibal asked Dolarhyde politely; the Dragon looked momentarily reluctant though he did as Hannibal asked, holding Will's hand up in the air to allow Hannibal a more dextrous cut.

Will was forced to watch as Lecter stripped the skin in between the slim incisions, carving out the ring that was lost. *Part of his brain spasmed, his eyes blinked.* The signal became confused: red hot fire at his chest, hit by the agony lancing from his hand. A confused muddle of pain resulted, dizzying in its effect. He felt his mouth puffing feebly as he tried to take in gulps of air, trying to bank the pain from overflowing.

The skin was removed, leaving a bloody strip, leaking down onto his knuckles. *For a split second Will remembered where he'd put it, the white gold wedding ring he hid from himself: in the box of things he wanted to give Eleanor when she was old enough.* A horrifying disconnect of present and possible future. *You love him, even as he...*

And yet, beneath it all, he found the experience laced with a vivid knowledge that all the pain, all of the agony, it was intense enough for one thing: he could *feel it*. *It jarred with the memory of the needle, pushed up tight into his armpit.* Whatever Hannibal had given him was wearing off. Will watched Lecter lean in and place the tip of his tongue against the stream of bright blood flowing from the wound at his hand, tasting him. *Because this is all a lie, it always has been. Everything was always a lie between us, wasn't it?*

"Warm apple brandy," Hannibal smiled, putting Will's arm down with little care; *and the fingers twitched softly against the metal slab,* "There was always a potency to you, darling. An unrealised potency. Do you know we were married once?" he said, speaking to the Dragon, "Still are, in fact. Perhaps it will make our forgiveness all the simpler. You forgave me, darling. Now it is time I forgave you."

I believed you, my own foolish hope. Is it foolish, or did I ever care? Will felt like laughing, if he could have. *I remember the day you promised me everything. Did you love me then? Maybe love isn't even the word, not for us. We held each other tight enough to kill.*

Putting the knife down, picking it up, pulling it right; Will had often suffered a recurring nightmare not long after moving to Miami. *Holding Hannibal from behind, the man reciprocal in his grasp, Will angry and struggling and holding the bread knife tightly to his throat and it would ask him...*

What do you do next? Until now, Will had always awoken before he was forced to answer. Only now, that same question was coming into play. *What do you do next, Will Graham, when the knife is put in your hand?*

"Is it a freeing quality, I wonder?" Hannibal mused aloud as the scalpel descended once more; Will watched it as far as his eyes would allow, *and was then forced to imagine the rest of its descent towards his chest.*

My remarkable darling, I do admire your courage. I think I'll eat your heart.

"Pl...hea...se," he managed to force his throat and lips to communicate, as his arm twitched; Hannibal looked at him, seemingly thrilled.

"Will, my darling," he said even as he continued with his work, "you always were a fighter."

"Oh," the first cut came, at his right shoulder, *two inches above the white crater of the bullet's path*, and descended at a precise forty five degree angle towards his collarbone, "*oh...g-go-hd...*"

"Shh now, it'll be alright as long as you don't struggle."

Warm, soft and deep; the cut rode down through flesh in one long line of unreality. Almost too much to understand. *He'd seen it, his first year in the Academy. An autopsy, fresh and red. The Y-incision had been like a zipper on a pencil case: enough to open up and see the human beast as it really was, a series of tubes and wires carrying what was needed. Pumping organs and Prothean cells, changing and realigning. He had been one of the three in the group that didn't throw up.*

Now he was incapable of doing little else but choke out pathetic, half-screams and wonder *what will they see when they open me? Tar and black pitch? Coal where my heart should be?* The cut stopped but the unconscionable agony remained, and Will knew he was twitching like a fish on a line as all his nerves fired at once. *A furnace for a stomach?* Then the scalpel reappeared at his left shoulder, slitting through in a symmetrical fashion until it joined the first, *All industrial workings, mechanical where there should be organic?*

Hannibal's eyes were alight as he watched them; Will felt his own go out of focus. His brain felt as if it sparked, fritzing on and off, in and out. Shock was setting in. He couldn't comprehend the pain. *No, no no no no no...*

"Plea...se," he said almost on instinct, blinking long and slow, "...god..."

“Praying to God: the suches and so-forths that come with religion,” Hannibal leaned back to survey his work, “personally I have always been a slave to the philosophy of self. Relying upon a higher power, or a lower one for that matter, takes the power from our own hands. God does not dole out fancy flattery in the shape of miracles, though it gives solace to ripped minds to think that he does.”

“God,” Dolarhyde said with a snuff of a sneer, “everyone has their own god.”

Beside him, Will could feel Dolarhyde pacing. *A subdued power, flashing as it came into contact with Lecter’s own.* His body felt alive with thrumming nerves, all screaming for attention. Wake up, Will Graham, wake up *and smell the roses.* The world rushed at an accelerated rate as he felt the blood run like mass deltas down over his chest.

...die here, I’m going to...

“A succinct truth,” Lecter said, inclining his head to Dolarhyde even as he watched him carefully, blood rimmed scalpel in his hand, “Perhaps deification itself is potency, and potency is our own realisation that the truth is the most important aspect of any moment; even if that truth is a lie.”

And his throat and his voice and his lips and his brain seemed to fuse together as the world shuttered in and out of perception; whatever drug still held him made the agony curve and twist but never debilitate. *It felt like falling,* and Will didn’t know how long he could keep a hold of the world around him.

Will Graham smiled as he spoke, “Do you...fe-el you...y-your pot...ency, Fra-ncis?”

“Don’t call me that!” the Dragon erupted, slamming his hands against the metal slab and thrusting himself forwards aggressively at Will; Lecter watched, seeming happily surprised with the turn of events. *Will knew it would be charmingly unexpected*, “You can’t call me that!”

“Oh?” he laughed in wheezes through his oesophagus, “my ap-ap-apol...ogies. Self-f-f image...is im-portant.”

“Shut up! Y-you’re wasting breath and time, *both of you are* with all this talking. She talked, oh she talked, and then she betrayed me just like all the rest. Talking is for those without motion. This monster is going to change. We are going to change him, *understand me*?” he shouted, taking Will by the hair and shaking his head roughly until he gasped.

“Quite,” Hannibal raised his eyebrows, putting down his scalpel next to Will’s hand; *he knew because he could feel the small, hard edge of the handle by his index finger,* “though I must admit I agree with Will. I feel it is better to accept oneself rather than hide behind another.”

“Says one who hid,” the Dragon spat nastily, “you hid, Dr. Lecter, hid all your beauty behind this filthy pig. Played house until you were more caged than you were in the Asylum.”

“Such language,” Hannibal said, eyes sharp, “perhaps it is difficult for *you* to understand. Though I would believe that possible.”

“People assume the worst,” Dolarhyde said, his voice calming momentarily from its guttural roar, “when they see what they want to see. I don’t need you to tell me what they assume when they see Francis Dolarhyde. Poor little cunt-face. That’s what. But they’re blind, just like most,” then back it came, that gravelly tone, “Just like that blind whore.”

“Betray...al is-the,” Will took a long, slow, pained breath and, for two quick pauses, almost hyperventilated; the pain was grinding the twin wound back and forth, the top of the Y shifting against his chest, “most...in-tim-ate of...wo-wound...s.”

“It is not a wound,” Dolarhyde bit back, “I will not carry it around with me. She will know, soon enough. Once I have changed you Graham, she’ll be the next to know.”

There was a smell on the air, *perfumed but bitter*. Will thought he could breathe it in, sense it as it filled his lungs. *Hannibal’s scent.* He closed his eyes for a few seconds, savouring the sheer terror of the act, of not knowing where the players stood or what their next direction might be. The scalpel stayed right by his hand, *one chance, one chance...*

“But to change another, one must understand oneself first of all,” Hannibal continued.

“I know who *I am*,” Dolarhyde snarled.

“To speak frankly, I am not so sure,” Lecter said, sounding like a teacher talking to a recalcitrant pupil after class, “You were never allowed to know, were you? Never taught what the gifts you have are outside your own understanding of them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your delusional schizophrenia,” Lecter said, as Will softly shimmied his hand over the scalpel, twitching the handle to the right spot, “surely you noticed.”

“You don’t understand,” the Dragon said, as if what he was hearing was too far beyond belief, “I thought you...you would. You told me...”

Tensing his arm muscles responded well. Will kept his breathing as even as he could, even as it skipped about like a kernel in a popcorn pot. *One chance, only one chance.*

“Oh? I see you feel you are the one with the questions and the answers, both. How can you be so sure what I told you, Francis, when you cannot even tell who you are?”

“Quiet!” the Dragon sounded incandescent with rage, enough to have him slough out his words past a wall of saliva and teeth, “You need to be quiet little boy!”

And amidst it all, Will lay, deep in a memory, a memory so expertly buried that at first it would not come out. *Memories kept safe and locked away and not needed, except for when he’d known they would be.* The sight of Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ grinning face: the gun kicking back in his hands, held steady and strong as he felt the welling, angry, hot, slick satisfaction of taking the man’s life from him, just as he had taken others: as Will watched him crumple into the corner of his kitchen cabinets, leaking life, and die. *See,* he had whispered, *you see.*

And Will saw.

“I see,” Hannibal said, tipping his head, “much deeper than I had suspected. Still, the possibility that you were more than just your run of the mill was always a draw. *Little boy.* Is that what she would say to you, Francis?” Hannibal asked, eyes steady, “Would she send you to your room and tell you that was what happened to bad little boys? Would she turn out the lights and ignore your cries? That’s not what grandmothers should do, is it?”

“Sh-sh-shu’ up! You don’t know her, you don’t understand..!”

Seeing was so much more than just understanding, right Will? You know you saw me because I could see you right back, buddy. No more a man than I was. No more a meek little man. We saw, didn’t we? We knew what it meant, to feel that squirming pulse in our hands, and snuff it out like a candle’s flame. We saw and we knew what had to be done.

“Did she make you wait Francis? Did you wait in the dark for her, wait for her to come to you and teach you what happened to naughty little boys who couldn’t respect their betters? What happens to greedy little alphas that don’t play by the rules?”

“QUIET!” the Dragon roared.

“Did she mock you? Was it ‘*dirty little boys don’t get loved, they get it cut right off’*? She treated you like filth, didn’t she? But you emulate her, even as you despised her.”

Will watched as Hobbs’ grin turned to Hannibal’s calm smile. *I missed you.* You left me. *We left each other to rot.* And I never knew if I was truly alone. *Or just falling apart.* Or already fallen. *A world built only for us.*

“Did you love her?” Hannibal asked the Dragon calmly; *and Will thought he could feel Hannibal’s question strike deep into his being, asking him for the truth,* “Even as she hurt you?”

Who is it that you see when you look at me? Am I a mirror, or blank frame? Does the mocking bird mock as it imitates? The scalpel was tight in his fist. *Or does the imitation seep deeper, does it go beyond the walls and down into the cracks?*

As the Dragon launched himself at Lecter, across Will and the table and the tight-holding-fist, there was a terrible moment of understanding.

Do you love me, darling?

Lecter reached up and grabbed Dolarhyde by the hair at the back of his head, pulling sharply to unbalance him just as Will, using what little was left of his strength, jerked his muscles tight and bent his arm at the elbow. He didn’t truly feel the scalpel enter the skin, but the slick, oily blood that gushed out over his hand, *he felt that. And the unbelievable feeling of the flaps of his skin at his chest opening at the movement, the muscle praising the air like a prostrate sinner.* He felt the first of the resistance as he achingly pulled down on the blade, feeling it slice keenly through skin and by god the awful retching, gurgling sound as Dolarhyde wrestled and flopped in Lecter’s grasp, and Will pulled and pulled and pulled and felt the spray jetting out in gouts, up over his arm, hitting his face, until his hand was so thick with gore that he could no longer keep his grip on the thin scalpel and it slipped away.

It sounded like boiling water sputtering out through a slim slit spout. *The last of Francis Dolarhyde.* It guttered out with every spasm of his huge body, suspended above like a grotesque puppet. Blood poured down, a hot, wet want of life over Will's bare abdomen. Gaping eyes still stared, still aware, down from under shaggy hair and above the open red line of flesh. Lips hung open to show the wavering maw of uneven teeth, dripping strings.

You see, the eyes said as they dimmed, *you see me, don't you Will.*

You see yourself, my little mongoose.

Hannibal let go. Dolarhyde slumped forwards onto Will, his heavy weight twitching and seizing and jerking like an electrocution. The pain became enough that the edges of his vision dimmed. *Please, don't let me slip, please fucking please..!*

He wished it was in a daze that he watched Hannibal reach down, putting his crooked elbows under Dolarhyde's armpits and lifting the man without much effort. Instead it was with a calm and yet regretful fascination. Will watched as Dolarhyde was revealed to him once more, like a proud gift; all of his power gone.

His neck was exposed beneath his heavy head, hung open with savage slices, *once, twice, three times,* a white show of oesophagus nestled inside. He had cut deeply, more than he realised. And the scalpel was still stuck inside, through the carotid artery, poking out and run with red, the blood flowing down its length in a constant gush like a kettle spout.

Dolarhyde was pushed back in a crumpling thump towards the floor, his hands flailing up into the air being all Will saw of his descent. *His heart was a calm beat, one and two and three and four, no rapid regret no fast paced unhappiness.* Will Graham lay upon the slab, right hand coated in the last of another's life, his left hand and chest in fiery pain, his neck itching and burning, his breath long and slow, and struggled to lick his lips.

The taste came back slightly metallic.

All he could see was Hannibal, sprayed fully up his right side with bright red blood, spattered up onto his chin and nose. *Will had never seen him look more genuinely unadulterated since they had met.*

"Well," he said, hands clasped and face alight with playful satisfaction, eyes tight on Will's as he smiled, "was it good for you too?"

The next half an hour passed in a bizarre daze. Hannibal gave him some clear liquid in a clear syringe which Will was in no state to resist. When the pain began to recede, then dilute to a warm glow, he knew it must be morphine, or the like. Will allowed Hannibal to tend his wounds with the calm that followed trauma like a bad smell.

The man was soft, gentle and professional in his movements. The bite on his chest was cleaned and swabbed with saline from a pack in a large box marked *'Kevin's only – hands off!'* , then some gauze placed over the top and stuck down with Micropore. The ripped stitches at his throat were removed and replaced with a steady hand.

Will watched in the mirror he found on the wall to his right as Hannibal tied off each stitch with the grace of an orchestra conductor. As Hannibal carefully bandaged his finger, finding some Mepitel to stop the material sticking to the raw, exposed muscle, he found he couldn't look away.

The beginnings of the Y were carefully cleaned and stitched together. Will lay still and, through hazy eyes, watched Hannibal work. Hannibal did not clean the blood from Will's right hand and arm, nor his face. Will thought, through his blinking stare at Lecter's movements, that the man must be enjoying the evidence of his sacrifice.

Eventually, as Hannibal tied off the final stitch, Will spoke.

"Someone w-would think...you were afraid...I'd f-f-forget about you."

His voice was weak and croaky but stronger than it had been. The blank tone was obvious even through the muted words. Hannibal continued his work, looking up only once to find Will's eyes. After he was done Hannibal reached out and helped Will to sit up. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that was a bad idea, but couldn't complain. It was only then that Will realised how cold he was without his shirt.

"You misunderstand my intent," Hannibal said, his arm around Will's back as he kept him steady.

"You like...to give me scars I can't...mistake f-for any other."

"If you'd like I could do the same," Hannibal said with a small, facetious smile as he lifted his left hand, "We could match."

"Oh," Will laughed emptily, bitterly, even as he leaned into the embrace, "I see. Or I...don't see. No. You want me...to f-figure it out, is that it? You...try me, don't you? Always trying...little bites. Did you..." he trailed off, blinking as his head swam and his world dimmed; Hannibal held him gently until he regained his senses, "did you know?"

"Know what, dearest?"

"That Dolarhyde would...come and f-find you if you w-wriggled...your way out of Chilton's pen?"

"If I simply told you, where would be the fun in that?"

"You always were...one to enjoy watching people...d-dance."

Will managed to look up as the arm disappeared. Hannibal was rummaging in a set of tall lockers. The first and second were opened and their contents discarded, but in the third he found a soft blanket. Will stayed still, swaying slightly, and allowed Hannibal to place it around his shoulders gently.

Sitting upon the edge of the slab, legs dangling above the ground, deep in the warmth of Hannibal and his effluvious scent, Will Graham looked down between his toes to find the body of his victim.

“You always did fall chill so quickly,” Hannibal said, rubbing at Will’s arms through the blanket.

“Everything,” Will said softly, “all of it. For this.”

“Not just for this,” Hannibal said, tipping his head even as he kept his eyes on his task.

“You wanted me...to find you.”

“It was imperative that I know,” Hannibal said, sniffing once, “whether your realisation had become or *un*-become.”

“Reali...realis...” Will clamped his mouth shut and let out a deep *hmm*; the nausea was rolling in, building up behind his gullet, “emeti..anti-emeti....”

Hannibal was already searching. He was given something, unsure as to what, *intravenous, straight into the...*

“Better?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“The same as most parts of you that I treasure. Would you say you are hiding, Will?”

“No.”

“Of course you wouldn’t.”

Moving closer, Hannibal stood by him, palm of his hand soft and warm against his back beneath the blanket. Will leaned his head to the right, feeling it against soft cotton.

“You would have, wouldn’t you.”

“I find there is no point in focusing on woulds or should. Just have and have nots, did and did nots.”

“Our philosophies a-are...divergent. Hannibal?”

“Mmm?”

“Did you want to watch me kill him?”

“I would say it was a joint effort.”

His eyes lifted slowly as his head felt heavy as he brought it up, his shoulders cold but lacking in the ache. His chest tight, but lacking in the blinding pain. *Yet the pain itself lingered, a memory hard to handle.* Will looked shakily to his right, into maroon eyes. Hannibal held him close.

“...Together.”

“Would you rather I impressed upon you the fact that it was most certainly your kill?”

“You don’t need to,” Will said quietly.

“That is good to know,” Hannibal smiled

“No,” Will shook his head as he looked away, “no it isn’t.”

It was quiet. Over the sound of voices and the pain roaring in his ears and the blood rushing and gushing and the flip flopping of wet flesh, Will had forgotten what a dead silence there was all around them. It seemed serene and yet, ultimately, isolating. The scent and the shock had fooled him. As he came down from the low-high, Will realised just where he was.

His shock made way for the bluntness, “So are you going to finish it?”

“I appreciate the challenge of figuring out your intent, but I must admit even I need a hint now and again.”

“Kill me. I feel you owe me that much.”

“Is that a hypothetical question?”

“I don’t ask in hypotheses.”

“I do not wish to kill you, Will.”

“I prefer lies of omission to outright lies, Doctor Lecter. Don’t lie to me.”

When he opened his mouth, Will watched him. Hannibal closed it slowly and smiled. He rubbed Will’s arms brusquely once more, as if the caring gesture was a distraction from his desecration.

“It was never as simple as killing you.”

“...Were you going to honour me?” Will asked dryly, feeling his voice crack.

Hannibal cupped his face, looking into his eyes, “Forgive you, darling. I was going to forgive you.”

Laughter was the only response; long, slow, grating, hateful laughter. Will knew he was watched as his shoulders shook and the rough sound emanated from his throat. *How did it all fall down to this? How can something be so beautiful and so ugly at the same time?*

“Well, how should I persuade you?,” Hannibal continued as Will’s laughter frittered and died, “Think of it like this. Animals see the world in shades of tone, because it makes the world survivable. You can see the predators move through the contrast of dark and light. You know when night turns to day. It is a serviceable life. But to make it truly worth living, I wish to see the colour in the trees and fruits upon their branches, the myriad shades of blue and green in the sea, the small sheen of rainbow in the spray just as the light hits...”

Lecter stopped, watching him closely.

“I realised many years ago that you bring colour to my world, more vivid than any other, when you realise your potential.”

“Shut up.”

“Will...”

“I told you to shut up,” Will said tightly through a swallow and a frown; it was a while until he could speak again, through another dizzy spell. He was forced to swallow down a bout of bile retching up into his throat. Hannibal kept to Will’s demand and did not speak.

“After you were gone, I felt so...betrayed by you, so much so that betrayal became the only thing that felt real to me. Soon...I felt betrayed by everyone. Everything became unreal.

“Your world is narrow, right down to the bare-bones-meat of it all. Narrow enough to meet your needs and no one else’s. And what am I? A distraction from the tedium. Maybe...” Will stopped to chuff out a pained laugh, “who knows, maybe you didn’t kill when we were together. Or maybe you were just more careful when you were with me because you didn’t want to lose that. Is that what..?”

He stopped, swallowing long and hard; Hannibal hadn’t interrupted, “you know, I was afraid once. You remember the night I told you? That I was pregnant? I had this thought. Seemed stupid at the time so I didn’t dwell on it. I was scared that our futures might not be the same. Only now I know I was looking in the wrong place. It was our love that doesn’t follow the same rules.”

“I doubt love is so definable as to have rules,” Hannibal argued.

“Oh not specific ones, just general rules,” Will said, staring blankly ahead, “you know, not taking perverse pleasure in their pain, or fearing the loss of entertainment at their death.”

“I see your inappropriate sense of humour has not left you.”

“I’m sitting above an eviscerated corpse with my cannibal husband,” Will shrugged, “can’t think of a better time to lighten the mood.”

“Eviscerate means disembowel, darling.”

“Semantics,” Will said coldly.

“My, this is civil. Are we to talk now of teacups and time and the rules of disorder?”

The memory was a cruel one, though Will knew he was perhaps to blame for being the first to touch on the subject. *The night they had finally felt complete, with the small life blossoming inside him and their lives stretching out towards the unknown horizon.*

Only now the horizon had been reached, and Will could almost hate himself for finding it. *If you could have left well enough alone, the search could have continued on and on and...* Will

stopped himself. Closed his eyes and opened them; the corpse remained at his feet in its pool of crimson, his love stayed slit through like the throat with its secret parts exposed, his life remained stabbed with pock-mark-moments so dark he could barely see them.

Nothing goes back together without showing the cracks.

“The teacup's broken,” Will said quietly, lips moving as if finding it difficult to say the words, “It's never going to gather itself back together again.”

“Not even in your mind?” Hannibal asked, “Your memory palace is building. I know it has. It's... full of new things. We share rooms together, many wonderful places. I have found you there, with your every wish fulfilled. Victorious.”

“When it comes to you and me, there can be no decisive victory.”

“We are in zero-sum game?”

“I...” *miss you*.

He could not say it, even if it were true. *Because this is what it is*, Will thought, *what it will always be*: a game. And if there was no winner, the only way to win was not to play. Lifting his heavy hands, Will gathered the blanket tight and held it closed across his bruised and broken chest. When he found Hannibal’s eyes, they were wary.

He spoke slowly and with purpose, “I miss my daughter, I miss my dogs, I miss the sound of the ocean, I miss waking up and making pancakes, I miss living without regret,” Will said; Hannibal’s face barely moved, yet his eyes seemed to show the emotion he was not willing to voice, “but I’m not going to miss you.

“You’re going to leave, and I’m going to stay here until they come and do what they do best,” Hannibal’s eyes and face did not move, and yet it was obvious to one who knew him well: the hurt showed through, “I'm not going to find you. I'm not going to look for you. I don't want to know where you are or what you do. I don't want to think about you anymore.”

There was a soft pause, through which years of undiluted hate and love seemed to float; finally Hannibal spoke, his voice calm yet desperate, “You delight in wickedness and then berate yourself for the delight.”

“You delight. I tolerate,” Will explained plainly, feeling the drying blood on his skin, “I don't have your appetite.”

Hannibal opened his mouth to speak. Will beat him to it.

“Goodbye, Hannibal.”

It was an odd sensation. He could almost believe it was unreal, if it weren’t for the aches and pains, both without and within. Because it hurt, far more than it should have, to watch Hannibal believe him. Believe that Will did not want him to be part of his world, not even a speck on his radar, not even a letter through his mail or a memory in his mind. Not there at all, not once, not ever before, not ever again.

For a mad, selfish, vicious moment, Will was tempted to open his mouth and take it all back; Hannibal looked so terribly stricken.

Instead he stayed stock still. *Their paths were there, in front of them.* As Will watched sightlessly, he *took the right path*, while Hannibal stood back, blank eyed, took off his gloves, took a thin, brown jacket from one of the lockers, put it on quickly and efficiently, and *took the left path.*

Will didn't see the point in pretending it wasn't the worst pain he'd felt that day. He waited until he heard the door close at the end of the corridor before letting his chin fall down against his chest. The culmination of their journey.

When Clarice Starling found Will Graham, he was seated in the back of an ambulance with a paramedic on one side checking his eyes for concussion, and a CSI on the other taking samples of blood and fibres from his skin and clothes. She waited, partly because she didn't want to interrupt, and partly because she was worried about asking why they were running procedure on Graham.

He looked like hell. She didn't want to look in case she saw too far down the cracks. She picked up on the next best thing:

"I need to get him to ward, ASAP," the second paramedic was arguing with a nearby cop, who Starling recognised.

Lt. Fogel looked tired but somewhat vindicated. His tanned, leathery skin contrasted with his thick, brown moustache and, without his hat, his bald patch glistened with sweat. He nodded to Starling as she approached.

"Thanks Melinda, but I'm sure he'll be out of my hair and in yours soon enough," Fogel said, nodding to Starling.

"Just clear this up quick," the medic said angrily, "my patient needs urgent care."

She left a bad taste in the air, mainly because Starling knew she was keeping him here against medical advice. *What did they do to you?* She decided someone else should answer that question. Made it easier to bear.

"Got here quick," Fogel said, fanning himself with a folded over R95 report sheet.

"Yeah," she said, not elaborating, "it's not a far drive from the hospital. How long since you found him?"

"No more than half an hour. Paramedics said they wanted him carted off to the local. I made sure to keep him here till you showed. Don't want to step on anyone's toes, you understand."

"Sure," she said through a smile that went nowhere near her eyes, "could you walk me through what you found? I'd like to be up to speed."

And so he did. She followed him into the long, low building and was shown to the blood soaked crime scene. Francis Dolarhyde lay face down on the floor by an oversized metal operating table; Fogel lifted him so she could see his face and neck, '*don't worry, we've got photos'* he said.

He showed her the Winchester shotgun they'd recovered, as well as the one spent shell and the pistol, each placed in sealed evidence bags. Clarice listened and absorbed and tried not to react too badly to Fogel's version of events because, for her, they sounded very likely. Which was too bad, really, because the thought of Will Graham killing anyone was enough to make her want to slap him hard enough to see stars.

She decided to wait until after there were no witnesses.

"Honestly?" Fogel said, "Thought he was a right jackass when we first met, but anyone with guts enough to do that's got my respect. Graham's taken another monster off St. Louis' radar. I can live with that."

It was easy to pretend to agree. She didn't want to start a fight about police procedure and the semantics of lawful self-defence. It would be too damning.

When she returned to air that did not reek of iron and fear and miscalculation, Will was alone, still sitting, legs out the back of the ambulance, under a large, soft looking blanket which he held tightly with his left hand. She noted the neat bandage upon it and wondered what lay underneath. When she approached she saw the stitches at his throat were fresh, and the skin beneath them was turning ugly with a large bruise. This time, she didn't sit down.

"You ok?"

He took a moment to react. Finally, under the flashing lights and amidst the sound of CSI's talking and radios going and police yawning, Will looked up. He didn't meet her eyes. His own stare fell somewhere around her throat.

"No," he said succinctly, "you?"

"No."

"That makes two of us then."

"Where's Lecter, Will?"

"Don't know."

"He was here, wasn't he."

"Maybe."

"If you're lying, we'll find out. Was he here?"

"I don't remember," he said blankly, finally meeting her gaze, "I'm confused."

She hated that she didn't believe him. Clarice found the paramedic and pulled him aside.

"Give me the rundown on Graham," she said sternly.

"Ok, uh, severe bruising at his throat and shoulder. Someone bit him," Clarice winced as the paramedic pointed to his chest, "here. Broke the skin. We've given him antibiotics. His shoulder's shot, crossing my fingers that it's just dislocated. The wound at his neck looks like it was re-opened due to trauma, but it's been re-stitched. The most serious is the incision on his chest," he looked at her, as if gauging how much she had expected to hear, "looks like someone was trying to open him up."

"Open?"

"Yeah. Standard autopsy Y-incision. They got two thirds of the way through and stopped. It's a textbook cut, but hell if I haven't seen anything so precisely done since I was at med school. And it's been cleanly patched up. Pretty damn impressive considering the depth."

Starling could imagine it, *Lecter gently tying the bandage around Will's hand, cinching the stitches at his throat, cutting the incisions into his flesh,* and it made her skin itch.

"We also found an incision on his left hand beneath the bandage. And of course he's a little dehydrated from the shock and has a bad case of hypertension. Blood pressure's on the rocks, but he's omega so that's to be expected considering. I want to take him in as soon as possible for monitoring and to get that Y-wound seen to."

"Is he on anything? Drugs?"

"Won't know for sure until we've run a tox on his bloods," the medic shrugged, "but if I was to guess then yeah, I think the slackness of his movement, his slow reaction speed to pain and the slight dilation of his pupils could point to some sort of tranquilizer. If they didn't bring their own, I find people tend to improvise. This is a veterinary clinic; someone could have used ketamine."

It was a magic word. Clarice rubbed at her eyes and thanked the medic tiredly. Ketamine: if they found it in his blood, there was no way to say whether Will truly did not remember what had happened in the blood soaked room, or was just unwilling to tell them the truth.

When she returned to him Will had his eyes closed. In the shifting lights, beneath the blanket, he looked small and fragile. If she hadn't been so angry, she was sure she would have let him be.

"Gonna make us work for this, aren't you."

"I don't know what you mean," Will said, eyes still closed; the paramedics stood back as the coroner drove up.

And she wondered, as she watched him, what it was that he saw when he looked Hannibal Lecter in the eyes. The media had derided Lecter as everything from a monster to Jack the Ripper to the devil himself. The gentleman alpha with several dozen skeletons in his closet.

Jack had painted Lecter as the most intelligent and complex psychopath he had ever encountered. Dr. Bloom as a betrayer. Dr. Chilton as a thorn in his paw.

Since she'd met him she'd tried to understand what appeared to Will when Lecter manifested himself.

"You told me once that if I ever felt like I was two steps ahead of Hannibal Lecter," she said, walking closer, "that I was to look up and find him waiting to strike."

"You know I was thinking about a vacation," Graham said, ignoring her.

"You're staring at the floor, Will. Is this supposed to be some big resolution? You both fly free? He's not the sort of animal that does well out of a cage."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Will tilted his head and pursed his lips, "some beasts are not meant to be caged."

"Jack brought you in to..."

"Jack brought me in because he wanted a sacrifice," Will interrupted her; when his eyes opened, Will stared straight ahead while the paramedic started closing up the ambulance, "and that's what he got."

"Was this ever about stopping Dolarhyde?" Starling asked accusingly.

Will stood as the medic helped him up and into the seat beside the gurney, belting him in.

"You killed him, Graham. You can't just walk away. That's not how this works."

"I think she'll like the ocean," Will finally met her gaze, a small smile gracing his blood spattered face, "thank you Clarice. I never said thanks, did I."

"We have to leave now, Agent Starling," the medic said to her as he stood by the door.

"Will, you have to tell me."

"Thank you, for everything."

"Will, *think* about what you're doing."

"Please stand back," the medic cut in.

"Will..!"

The door closed. Clarice was left amidst the bustling hive of the unaware. In amongst them, she felt like the woman who knew too much. Because Will Graham was throwing away his sense of justice and morality, ridding himself of the ties that bound him, taking the easy way out. It was enough to turn her stomach even as she hated him for it. Because he was doing all the wrong things for the wrong reasons and...

And in a startling moment, she knew. It clicked. *Slid into place*. Oddly enough, the first thing she realised was that she no longer resented her father for what he had risked. Because every day she had watched him walk out the door with his badge on his shirt and his gun at his hip and worried that he wouldn't come home alive. He couldn't give that up for her, because he had done it *for her*.

Just as Will Graham was doing this for his daughter.

Letting go.

"Are you kidding? I truly hope you're kidding. His DNA's all over the crime scene. Jimmy Price, Graham's self declared god of the print index, not only pulled his digits from the scalpel in Dolarhyde's neck *but* also got Lecter's prints from the inside of the latex gloves found on the autopsy table. The boys in the lab have recreated the kill and the angle of the lacerations. No reason for Dolarhyde to keep his neck there for cutting, and there's latex residue on the back of his neck, the hairs are ripped."

Purnell, head of the Office of the Inspector General, stared at him through her wide, watery eyes and frowned at him through her tight lips. Jack felt like telling her to go shove her head up her ass. His job was in the fire anyway, might as well go out with a bang. Years of cow towing were all that staved off his need to tell his long hated boss where to shove it.

He watched as she leaned forwards and crossed her hands on her desk.

"They killed him together."

"And none of that makes a blind bit of difference," Jack sighed, "and you know why."

"No, but I know why *you* think so."

"I don't think so, I know so."

"So he's lawyered-up, that only makes his guilt all the clearer."

"No it's worse than that," Jack said as if he were talking to a five year old, "Will didn't call his lawyer. Will doesn't *have* a lawyer. He called the Lecter family, and they called their lawyers."

"Considering all the evidence and the..."

"Clint, Clint and Caraway," Jack had the satisfaction of seeing Purnell at least recognise the threat, sitting back into her chair and licking her lips, "I'm sure you can bring them to mind, yes? You remember Hunt vs Thackeray? That was them. Triple homicide: we had all the evidence, witnesses, time scale, motive, all wrapped up...and they got us shot down in flames on a couple of technicalities and a misfiled report. The Figgus kidnapping? He got five months in a min-security and only served one. That was them. They're great, guilty and innocent alike, if you can afford them."

“I thought Graham and the Lecters weren’t on speaking terms,” Purnell tried her best to scrabble for whatever was left.

“So I heard. But hey, I guess people work in mysterious ways sometimes.”

“Christ, I should have known,” she said, taking her thumb nail in her teeth, “Graham always did know how to cover his own ass.”

“No,” Jack said, shaking his head, “he’s never known how to do that, and you know it. Hannibal’s family do, and he was just lucky enough, or unlucky depending on how you look at it, to get mixed up with them. Anyway, that’s all secondary. You know that arresting him would be a mistake.”

“Oh?” she said, mouth like a sucked lemon.

“You want that headline hanging over your head?” Jack laughed incredulously, “ ‘FBI Baltimore act to jail victimised male omega for self defence kill’. Or no, maybe ‘Inspector General makes stance clear on male omega rights’.”

“This isn’t political...”

“It’s always political. I *know* I’m preaching to the choir on that one. Look,” Jack sat forwards, feeling a little light-headedly reckless, “I fucked up. Fucked up big time. You want my job? Take it. Hell, I’ll probably even thank you for it in a couple of months when my blood pressure hits normal for the first time in nine years and I stop having heart arrhythmias that scare the shit out of my cardiologist. But leave Will Graham alone. Man’s been through enough.”

“And Lecter?”

“We got him once, we can get him again. He’s not the type to stay subtle for long. Let someone else find Lecter.”

“Well, with that attitude maybe...” she stopped as her phone began to ring shrilly; Purnell let out a sharp sigh and pulled it from her pocket, studying the screen, “I have to take this. Purnell speaking. Yes? Uh huh I can be there in ten. Hang on. Jack?”

He looked up to find her with her hand over the phone. Her eyes were unusually clear.

“You might not believe me when I say this, but you’ve been nothing but gold for this unit. I’d hate to see you throw that all away for someone who doesn’t have any respect for how we work. Think about that before you sign your life away for Will Graham, ok?”

She left him sitting, staring at his office, and trying to rationalise trading it all away for a broken man and his piss poor attempts at playing by the rules.

But then he remembered *a pair of desperate eyes as he was held in the fierce grip with a knife to his throat, as Jack pointed his gun and tried to stop what he’d started, and those eyes clouded by morphine and pain and tears as he explained why the last three years of his life had been a lie, and those eyes drugged and delusional as they begged him ‘tell me what to*

do, tell me what to do, tell me what...'. And Jack remembered that he promised himself that he wouldn't throw away this one chance, because chances for redemption were few and far between.

Take them while you can get them.

The beeps were steady, from the room down the hall. He lay in his bed, rolling his little pill cup. The drugs inside rattled around. *Ancillary feelings fighting through layers of tranquilizers and pain meds.* Things he didn't want to have to deal with. Will put the cup down on the table, drugs untouched.

Time moves like a wave, Will thought as he stared at the opposite wall, with its clock and its green paint. *First time I was hospitalised, I killed a killer. Second, I was stabbed saving a life. Third, I shot a killer, fourth I saved a life...now fifth. Does it count for both? Or do they all count as both?* In the end Will was sure the philosophical semantics wouldn't count for much. People judged on how the media reported. It all came down to how the FBI wanted to use him: as a hero, or a scapegoat.

Disinfectant, illness and old soup: the smell of hospital was drearily familiar. Though it was a different ward altogether it was barely distinguishable from any other he had ever visited. The most he could be grateful for was the individual room he'd been shipped into: an omega perk. It was one of the few times he would ever bow to the benefits of his status.

Yet still, the hospital issue shirt was stiff and uncomfortable. It rubbed at his arm, at the burn which was now reaching the stage where all it did was itch. He had restless legs, but his ankle hurt every time he moved. His shoulder ached in its strict sling. His chest felt tight with the gauze strapped down and the bandages pulled to. His neck pulsed hotly as the bruises deepened.

With his left hand Will inspected himself, his stubble growing out just long enough to make him fit in perfectly on the streets by a cardboard box. At the very least, it covered the thick-line scar on his right cheek.

"Mr Graham?"

It was easy to ignore the doctor's voice. He'd heard enough medical jargon this last week to last him a lifetime.

"You have visitors."

But those words had his attention, as did the familiar warm scent that accompanied them. Turning his head to find his plain, green doorway filled with everything he needed to see was more than overwhelming. So much that it was almost fairytale-like. All he could do was put his left arm out as she was handed over in an awkward exchange of arms and legs and curled hair.

“Daddy,” she said, so quietly that he was sure only he heard it as she clung to him.

“*Sweetheart*,” he said, his voice pained.

It would be the last conversation they would have for a long time.

The agony was realised only as it was released, because trying to deal with it before he knew it had an ending would only have ruined him. The fear that had hounded him ever since he had stepped foot in that cab, ever since he’d run into that burning house, ever since he’d gone to Atlanta, Birmingham, ever since he’d agreed to deal with Lecter...the fear that he would never see her again.

All underpinned by the greater fear: that he had never deserved to get her back in the first place. *All this time fighting for her as you lost yourself, hating that you couldn’t give her what she needed, but that you needed her regardless.*

Will closed his eyes and kissed his daughter’s face, holding her close. Her hair tickled his nose. He didn’t care. One of her hands was curled into his shirt and sling by his right shoulder, the other around his neck. It hurt, but somehow that only made it more vilifying. *At least I know I’m not dreaming.* Will felt like laughing.

When he finally looked up it was to find a mixed reception.

Jack was easy to read; he was wearily, tight-lipped-angry, underlined by a great big helping of job satisfaction and something resembling conscience. Beverly Katz looked relieved and shocked in equal measure, which he guessed was mostly at his appearance. And Alana Bloom looked blank, so much so that Will was unsure how to greet her. Will shifted Eleanor awkwardly until she was snugger against his side, running his left hand down the back of her little yellow, sleeveless summer dress.

Will looked up and asked, “Did anyone bring her coat?”

Three blank stares greeted him. Will was sure he was still the entrepreneur of utter impropriety. He took momentary solace in the thought, even as the words haunted him: *I see your inappropriate sense of humour has not left you.*

“Ok,” Will said, while he thought ‘*clearly none of you have kids’*, “Bev could you pass me that...” he clicked his fingers as he pointed to the chair by his bed, searching for the word, “...that, uh, blanket? Thanks. Here Ellie,” he put the blanket around her one handed, which was difficult as she refused to let go of him, “that better?”

Elle nodded, face pressed against his shirt. Will kissed the top of her head. He took a long sigh, *mainly to draw in the familiar and calming smell of his pup*, before looking up at the jury line.

“Do I get to ask questions before this all starts?” he asked.

“Depends on the questions,” Jack said, closing the door behind them.

“Don’t hate me for going for the obvious. How’s the blame falling out?”

“No blame for self defence, Will,” Beverly said, hands loosely on her hips.

“Oh,” he said, *no need to breathe a sigh of relief when he was still playing the angle that he couldn’t remember a thing,* “ok.”

“You done?” Jack asked, “Because I’d like my turn.”

“Jack,” Beverly gave him a withering but stern stare, “this really isn’t the time.”

“Why’d you call Lecter’s lawyers?” Jack asked, ignoring her.

“Did it do me any harm?” Will asked; he could tell Jack wanted to answer his rhetorical question but kept his mouth shut, “I needed to go after him alone, Jack. It was the right thing to do.”

“No, you thought it was the right thing to do *for you.*”

“Wasn’t meant to end the way it did. I didn’t think that...” *that he would make me work for it so damn hard*, “...you know sometimes I think this is the only way it was supposed to end.”

“Oh?” Jack said, eyebrows raised, “Well that’s nice to know. Really. I’m *happy* for you.”

“Jack, please,” Alana said stoutly, “enough.”

“Remember anything about that ending, do you?” Jack continued regardless.

“Honestly,” Will said, looking down at his bandaged chest, “I’m glad that I don’t.”

I wish I didn’t.

Beverly’s phone rang.

“Hell, I’ll get kicked out of the ICU,” she muttered, quickly leaving the room.

“I’m going to get your records,” Jack said tiredly, pointing at him, “don’t go anywhere, ok?”

Which left the room uncomfortably empty, but for Alana Bloom. Will held Eleanor tightly and tried to ignore the silence. After a few moments, Alana walked to the empty chair and sat down. She looked deflated.

“Did Jeffrey Milo bring her up?” Will asked; Alana frowned, “About my height, blonde hair, green eyes?”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah I met him for a couple of minutes.”

“Did he...” *do you really want to know?*, Will asked himself, “...did he say anything?”

“Not really. Just went through the motions, really. Handed her over to the lawyers, then the lawyers gave her to us. You’re lucky, you know. Damn lucky that they did.”

“I know. I know I am,” *although it was more judgement than luck.* Because Will knew why Murasaki had given him all that she had: returning Eleanor to him, granting him the use of their lawyers. All because...Will remembered what he had done the night before.

Letting him go.

“Will,” she said the name slowly, as if it were a small, cautious creature just within reach, “I’m not here to grill you.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming into the equation.”

“He was there. We know he was there.”

“Uh huh.”

“I know what he did to you because I read the report.”

He stayed silent, leaning his head against Eleanor’s.

“Are you really going to let him walk away?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Will shrugged awkwardly with one shoulder, “I don’t remember.”

“Bullshit,” she shook her head, “Christ Will. Please just...would you be straight with me, for one minute?”

“You of all people are going to ask me that?”

“Yes, I’m asking you.”

“Don’t push me, Alana.”

“Is this how you’re going to leave us? With nothing but ghosts?”

“That’s rich,” Will smiled flatly, “really, considering that’s how you left me.”

“What?”

“You know. You *know*. Because I spent years blaming Lounds for losing Elle. I just didn’t want to spend years blaming you too.”

“Oh god, don’t bring this up now,” Alana rubbed at her face and looked tired, “that was different. I didn’t do it for a fucking headline, I did it to save your child’s *life*.”

“I know.”

“I helped you get her back,” Alana sounded as if she were rationalising her choice.

“Oh, so now you don’t have to feel guilty for signing off on the child services reports because you helped me get her back?” Will asked.

“It wasn’t like that...”

“Alana, please. Please, just don’t. I know. Part of me will always thank you, because you did what you had to do. And part of me will always resent the hell out of you, because I know that there was a piece of you that liked watching everything I had fall apart. Because I had everything you wanted.”

She stared at him, shocked and furious, “That’s not true. How *could* you say that?”

“Sorry,” he said facetiously, “the truth tends to run away with my mouth when I’m done giving a shit.”

“You need to take a step back,” she said seriously, hurt and angry, “and *look* around you before you accuse me of revelling, *revelling* is that what you think? That I loved your misery?”

“Just a little,” Will smiled tightly, “right?”

“God, you son of a bitch.”

Jack nearly ran into Alana on the way back in. He gave the retreating doctor a strange look as Alana left, her heels clicking smartly on the floor. Jack pushed the door to and sat down in Alana’s vacated chair, flipping open Will’s charts.

“How much longer?” Will asked.

“Do you mean for the hospital or until the trial?” Jack said soberly.

“Either.”

“...There isn’t going to be a trial,” he admitted slowly, shrugging, “it’s...I managed to convince them that it was in our best interests to push this as a success story.”

Eleanor shifted a little and curled her knees up. Will winced as her weight leaned against his wounded body, and managed to push himself up the bed a little higher into his sitting position.

“Thanks, Jack.”

“Least I could do.”

“Look, about Dolarhyde...”

“Ah!” Jack lifted his hand, palm up, “I don’t want to hear it. You trying to make me culpable? As far as I understand it, Will,” he said, staring him straight in the eyes, “you don’t remember a thing, right?”

Nodding slowly, Will agreed to take on the pact, “That’s right.”

“Good. Then we don’t have anything to worry about.”

“They going to force the resignation or are you taking it without a fight?”

“You let me worry about who’s resigning from where,” Jack said, rubbing at his neck, “Oh, and as for hospital stay? Five days. Two for treatment, Three for observation.”

Will licked his lips and *expected to taste iron*. He closed his eyes and opened them *expecting to see bright lights.* He thought he heard his voice, *Oh god, oh god please...*

“Do you think it’s...” he frowned, looking back to Jack, “possible to be free of it all?”

“I don’t think we ever forget,” Jack said, shaking his head slowly, “it’s a drawback of the job. We’re not designed to overlook misery.”

“I just wanted to be a family,” he said quietly against Eleanor’s curls, “it would have been enough.”

“Wasn’t your fault. You believe it was your fault? Then you’re a goddamn sucker.”

You’re a sap. Will closed his eyes and laughed, hating that it pulled at the slit muscles and bruised skin. When he opened them Jack was watching him as if he were mad.

“I gave the same advice recently.”

“Then maybe you oughta take it,” Jack said, raising his brows.

Will thought he might just do that, *if he could only find...*

It was amazing what could be accomplished in six weeks. It had been as easy as asking: Murasaki was being almost uncomfortably accommodating. Enough to make Will feel a stab of guilt every time she gave him something else. *The money, use of their villa in the South of France, cruise tickets.* All for the price of one man’s freedom.

As he and Eleanor sat atop their carry-on luggage, Will folded a paper airplane from their registration details. The Miami sun was hot and high, baking the sidewalk. Behind them, their little house on the ocean sat empty and barren, gutted and packed and all ready to be shipped on ahead of them. Even the dogs had been put into the first steps of quarantine, ready for the long journey to their new home. He had considered re-homing them, but then realised that he was done compromising himself for the sake of others. He loved his dogs, and they loved him, and that was all he needed to know.

The last couple of folds made the nose of the little paper airplane nice and balanced.

“You think it’ll fly?” he asked her as he held up against the beating sun.

Eleanor didn’t answer, her arms stuck fast around Winston the dog. She gave him a long slow glance and, when he didn’t break it, eventually nodded.

“Ok, let’s see.”

Will pulled back, waited then thrust his arm forwards and flicked his wrist. The airplane sailed on the hot air like a bird, catching the updrafts. It slid to a shushing halt on the asphalt just as Beverly Katz pulled up, crushing it under one large wheel of her Dodge Ram. Will looked at Elle and shrugged, raising his palms. She looked away, back to the pavement, but rushed to his side and held him close as Beverly exited her car.

“They didn’t have any fanta,” she said, handing Will a bottle of 7up, “so I got you that. Here sweetie, I got you orange juice.”

Elle hid her face when Beverly offered the carton. Will stroked her hair and took the juice.

“Here kiddo, you like orange.”

She took it carefully and quietly, before hiding her face against his leg. Beverly cracked open her can of coke and took two large gulps.

“Augh, hate this stuff,” she said, “but nothing like it on a hot day. You sure you don’t need a hand to the harbour?”

“You helped us pack,” Will said, thinking of the years of memories trapped in a dozen cardboard boxes, “that’s help enough. Honestly.”

“No heavy lifting,” she said seriously, “you heard the doctors, right? Weren’t just nodding and uh huh-ing them?”

“I heard.”

“Ok. Well,” she leaned back on her hands, “I’m going to be jealous. South of France? Most of us only dream of that. How long are you able to stay there for?”

“Um, actually there’s no limit,” Will said, scratching at his neck and then forcing himself to stop the unhealthy habit, “Hannibal has dual nationality, did you know? He, uh...anyway that’s not important. We’re still bonded so that passes his dual nationality onto me and Elle. We can stay as long as we want.”

“Wow. Ok,” Beverly seemed to be searching for things to say, “Well, I heard you have a vineyard, right? On your slopes? All that French wine at your fingertips.”

Will let out a small laugh, “Spend my life drunk on extravagance?”

“Have to be drunk on something,” she said dryly, “or we might start remembering where we are and what we’ve done.”

“True,” he sighed, “more true than I could handle.”

A car drove past, leaning out into the other lane to avoid their little cluster of bags and legs.

“Did you see the headlines yesterday?” Beverly asked once it was gone.

“Yup. Nice not to be vilified by the press for once.”

“Jack hoped you’d be happy.”

“Happiness is subjective,” Will shrugged, “not something you can impose on someone else. Did you see Lieutenant Fogel’s quote?”

“Yeah. Think he likes you,” she grinned.

“He was a good guy, when they found me...” Will scratched at his chest again, “...you know what he said?” Beverly shook her head, “*Good job.* That’s what he said. *Good job.* I get the feeling that,” he cleared his throat, “no one understands that we have a fundamental flaw in the way we see people,” he shook his head, “Anyway, that’s not going to change. Do you know if Starling’s staying on?”

“She’s joining the team. Your spot. She holds her own, let us know that pretty quick. Already put Jimmy in his place, something about, oh what was it? Um...damn, you know I can’t even remember exactly what she said now, but it would have cracked you up.”

“I’ll bet,” he smiled, pulling Eleanor closer and helping her to put the straw in her juice box, “look, Bev, thanks for this.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I had a few holiday days left to take,” she waved away the thanks, “and nothing to do with them.”

“I’m pretty sure you could’ve thought of something more relaxing.”

The conversation wound down. They sat in a row, on the sidewalk, legs out into the road, drinking juice and keeping each other company. The heat shimmered in hazy waves, making the day wobble. Will closed his eyes and let his head drop back, even as the strain it put on his chest was painful. The muscles were incredibly tender still, as they slowly stitched themselves back together. He was yet to decide if he was lucky or unlucky that Hannibal was such a first rate surgeon.

The sun shone through his closed eyelids in a red maze of veins. He fished out his sunglasses from his shirt pocket and dropped them on.

A whisper from the dulled world: *you always did see better in the dark.*

Somehow the day felt cold. He sighed and stood up, shaking out his left arm. His right was still tender, even now loose by his side. When he started pacing he didn’t truly notice it, not until he realised there was a shadow following him. Will turned and looked down, finding Eleanor behind him, Will blinked.

He looked up to find Katz watching them both from her slouch on the ground. Her eyes were difficult to accept; *sad and resigned.*

“You ok?”

How many times will you have to be asked?

“Mmm,” he hummed; his shirt was open two buttons. Will reached inside to scratch at the itching skin around where the stitches had been, pushing back the material.

When he looked back, Beverly was watching him, blinking, “What did he do to you, Will?” she asked him through the hand over her mouth, shaking her head as she stared at the fresh purple scar on his finger and the lines on his chest.

“What has he *not* done to me?” Will smiled emptily.

“Will...”

“I’ll be ok, Bev. I promise. We’ll be ok.”

“That’s all I want,” she said, nodding, looking up to meet his eyes, “I just hope it’s what you want too.”

“More than anything. I’m done with searching,” Will stared at next doors house, with its large, gauche ‘For Sale’ sign in the yard; *Milo’s house*, “guess I have to be found at some point.”

“Good,” she said with a small smile of her own, “because I didn’t want to have to use foul language in front of this little cutie,” Bev said, standing up tiredly to walk to his side; she ran her hand through Ellie’s curls, but the little girl didn’t react, “Take the time, ok? Take the time to remind her how important she is.”

“Time’s all I’m going to have,” Will said, looking down at his daughter, “right honey? Going to go on a big ship, huh? Maybe you’ll see more dolphins. Remember the dolphins you saw when Mr Milo took us out on his boat?”

Eleanor pushed her face down into the soft dog in her hands and stayed utterly silent. Will sighed and rubbed at her back, wishing he had an answer. He looked to Bev and licked his lips.

“Still not speaking to me.”

“It’ll come,” Bev said confidently, “just give her time."

“Yeah,” he said, “I know.”

The rock and sway of the ocean was difficult to discern on so hulking a ship, but the roll was still there. A slight nausea, mixed with the feeling of being a cork bobbing up and down in a swimming pool.

They were still close enough to shore that the gulls were bothering the ship, swooping and cawing. The light ash boards made a pleasantly heavy *clunk* as they walked across, under the steely sky. A short woman with red hair turned the corner, bumping his arm.

“Oh god, sorry,” she said, breathless, with her camera bumping back and forth around her neck and her cagoule bright and flashy.

“No problem,” Will noted Elle hiding in behind his legs.

“Overcast, huh?” she said, keeping the conversation going beyond its boundaries, “Typical. I hope it’s sunny in Saint Malo.”

“Right,” Will said, moving off.

“Oh, hey there honey,” she said, spotting Elle; Will tensed up, “isn’t she the sweetest? Four?”

“Three.”

“I have two of my own,” she said, lifting her shoulders in a loose shrug, palms up, “five and seven. Handful, but then you’ll know all about that.”

“Sure do,” Will smiled flatly.

“Ok, well, nice speaking to you,” she said, rubbing her hands as Will walked off, “maybe see you about at dinner.”

He left in the silence of the air and the water and the movement of the floating hulk. Looking out over the edge, he felt like he was standing on top of a skyscraper, looking down on the waves far below. It wasn’t entirely pleasant, but Elle seemed to enjoy it. Or he thought she did. She stared at it mutely, holding Winston close. Will hunched down and picked her up, putting her down on the curved wooden seats. They huddled together, looking out towards the horizon.

“You warm enough, kiddo?”

A pause. She nodded.

“Ok. Want some hot chocolate?”

A quick nod. Will smiled.

“Uh huh. Thought so,” he said, “come on, let’s...”

Ring ring...ring ring...

He answered without looking, keeping quiet as it went on like a trilling bird desperate to warn, because the thought that it could be...

“Hey.”

“Milo,” he said on instinct.

“Yeah. Yeah,” he said, pausing as if not knowing what to say, “it’s me.”

A gaggle of young women and men poured out onto the deck, laughing and holding onto each other. Will held his tongue as they walked past, leaning against the railings and chatting. *Too close.* He stood up, taking Elle's hand, and led her towards the prow where it was quieter.

"You want to..?" Will swallowed, "Umm. Sorry."

"No. It's ok. I just wanted to check that, well... you were ok," Jeff said, the line crackling a little.

"I am," he said too quickly, "we're good."

"It's just I didn't get a chance to see you, what with the house and Susan...and, well, yeah."

"We just left, actually, about twenty minutes ago."

"You're breaking up a bit."

"Reception's pretty bad, probably won't last much longer."

"Will..."

He couldn't bring himself to interrupt the hesitation, even as it spanned out; long enough that he thought the connection might have dropped. Then...

"I just wanted to check on you. I don't know if I ever said but," a long breath, "I'm going to miss you. Miss you a hell of a lot and...well. Well there it is."

"I know."

"Don't tell me that's all you're gonna say."

"Forgive me?"

"What?"

"Forgive me, for all the shit I've done."

"You're making it sound like you're gonna die," forced humour, "you're not, are you?"

"No more than any other day," Will joined in, "how's the sale going?"

"Uh," a wobble in his tone, cleared out with a cough, "ok, actually. Selling better than yours. Why the hell did you give asking price?"

"Been speaking to my real estate agent?" Will frowned through a smile.

"Yeah, actually," Jeff said, chuckling, "she's a real, um, nice gal."

"Sure. Nice line. Did she scare the crap out of you too?"

"*Oh* yeah."

Will laughed, even if it hurt. Looking down into the water, *the white horses marched on*. *Memories he would never let go, sand and the smell of barbecue smoke on hot skin and sun tan lotion and stolen kisses.*

"You know, I resented you a heck of a lot for pushing your way into my life," Will said softly, "I'd...I'd even think about ignoring you when you'd come and knock at the door. But I didn't because...you were good to me, and that's a rare thing these days. So I'm sorry," he said, heartfelt enough that he *felt it*, "let me tell you that I'm sorry and mean it. I really am. I just...need you to know that."

The wind picked up. Eleanor pushed herself up on her toes to try and look through the slatted spaces out towards the ocean. Will listened closely.

"Not after everything," Milo said, as if he was speaking to himself, "I don't blame you, so I can't forgive you. Ok?"

"I guess I deserve that."

"Maybe you do. But I don't want you to leave me thinking I hate your guts. Ok? I always really..." the sentence couldn't be finished and Jeff didn't make things complicated by doing it, "So don't make me out to be the bad guy here."

"Oh, I know bad guys, Jeff. I know bad guys, and you're not one of them."

"Good because..." his voice suddenly began chopping in and out. Will looked at his reception; down to one bar, "an...that w..."

"You're really breaking up. Jeff?" he amazed himself by how desperate he sounded.

The interference grew worse. Then nothing. Then a few quick beeps and Will was left staring at Jeff's profile from his contact list, *call ended*. Will felt he was subject to many endings, so much so that he was sure his life couldn't be a story any longer. Too many to count.

When the phone rang again Will answered quickly, because this might be the last chance he had to...

"Darling."

One word that stopped his world. Will found himself staring at the ironclad sky and wondering if there was a sunny day behind it. Were the skies pale blue, cloudless and radiant? Would the day be perfectly dry with no threats of rain or wind, *just right?* And Will realised that he would never know, and he would have to live with not knowing, because the clouds would always be in his sky.

Which was why he opened his mouth and, almost involuntarily, said, "Hannibal?"

"Ah, you are there," the waning reception made Hannibal's voice slightly unstable, "I thought I had missed you. Seems I am not too late."

There was nothing he could say. Will stood on the deck, staring out at the ocean, and knew that nothing he did would allow him to flee. There was no distance between them. There never had been, and there wouldn't be now.

"I wished to know you had made it safely onboard, and it seems you have. I hope you do not get seasick. We never did sail together, did we? There are a few...ps an...tricks I have to make life on the water easier. Perhaps if the lit-tle one...an't find her sea legs? Ginger, in hot water to steep for...ive minutes. Works wonders."

You're breaking up. He couldn't say it, because he couldn't acknowledge that he wanted to hear more.

"And don't...rget to thin...bout it, dearest but...on't dwell on it. Yes?"

You can't, because the world doesn't spin and the clock doesn't tick when we're together. And time must move on.

"Will?" he was asked, suddenly clear, "Are you still there?"

It was as surprisingly easy as it was damningly difficult to put his hand over the side of the boat and drop his phone into the water. Will imagined Hannibal's voice falling with it, still there, *still reaching out for him*, as it fell. He didn't hear the splash.

"Shit," one of the young men was saying from further down the deck, "hey man, your phone. You ok?"

"He dropped it," one of the women was saying softly, touching her partners arm.

Will felt a tug at his left hand. When he looked down, Eleanor was looking up at him, small fingers curled around his thumb. She looked concerned, an expression out of place on a three year old. He hunkered down, putting himself level with her, knowing that the look in his eyes wouldn't be anything he wanted her to see. But he couldn't hide himself forever, *not forever*.

"What's up, sweetheart?"

Winston the dog was put down with all the circumspection and delicacy of a human child. Then one hand appeared at his left cheek, the other at his right. Eleanor leaned in and clumsily kissed at his nose.

Will I kiss it better?

She was pulled into a sudden and tight hug. She found her little arms up to his shoulders and held on. Will knew his tightly closed eyes were keeping the world safe from him, and him safe from the world. After a few moments he leaned back, holding her curls gently as he kissed her forehead. She looked up at him with maroon eyes and no need for words between them.

"Let's get you that hot chocolate, yeah?" he said through a smile.

A nod in reply. Will watched her pick up her dog and take his hand as they walked towards the cafe, under the confused stares of the onlookers.

Knowing that they understood each other.

Chapter End Notes

As a quick side note, I have had experience of being cut open with a scalpel without proper anaesthesia (I had an infected wound after surgery that needed to be reopened. The doctor gave me a local anaesthetic that didn't take effect because I had infected tissue, not because he was a sadist. Although he didn't believe that it was blazing agony. He wasn't a very good A&E doctor) so I hope the description was suitable because, being one of the worst experiences of my life, it was honestly very difficult to describe. Also the full recovery time from that sort of incision is 6 weeks, but after three you're able to move around quite normally, only with twinges if you move the wrong way or pull at the muscles too much.

So, c'est fini, mes chéris. I will take this opportunity to say thank you to everyone who reviewed, I have very much enjoyed your myriad of different reactions and your passion for this tale, and those who left kudos and even just read and enjoyed. I write because I love to do so, but it's always much more satisfying to know someone else has also enjoyed it.

As for the story, there will be an epilogue, probably of a reasonable length (no more than this chapter). It won't be out exceptionally quickly, but I will have it out soon enough. I hope that the ending has left you with a nice taste of hot chocolate in your mouth and that, if it has not, the epilogue will offer you the resolution you are looking for. Technically, they will both be 'endings', and you can choose to leave the story wherever you wish. I always feel, with Will and Hannibal, that endings are very subjective.

So for now, all I can say is 'à la prochaine' for some and 'ravi d’avoir fait ta connaissance' to the others. Thank you for coming along for the ride with me.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

There are some lines in French in this chapter - a big THANK YOU to Palpalou and Sanashiya for correcting my awful French and translating for me! For the translation, please see the end notes. I've made sure to leave a big gap at the bottom of the story so that you won't accidentally see the ending by mistake, as long as you zoom all the way to the bottom! Alternatively, if you put the lines into google translate I'm sure it'll give you a good gist of what's going on.

Also, just a quick note to say thank you so much to everyone for sticking through this with me. I have had a lot of fun writing this story, even if some of it was a little difficult and draining. I hope you've all enjoyed yourselves, because that's what it's all about, and even if there is no more 'Hannibal', I always take solace in the fact that someone will always write another story. These characters will never and should never be lost.

There may be a follow up story to this, from Eleanor's point of view which leads through her growing up, but it's only in the planning stages so it'll be a while. It will be a separate story, though I'll try and attach it to this one as a series.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Down through the wood, in the late afternoon sun, the water was dark over the stones. There was no breeze, though the canopy rustled like a paper bag crunched between eager fingers. The sun swam through the sky, thick with haze and backlit by pearlescent cloud, but only reached the pine forest floor as a glowing mesh over needles and mulch.

The sound of distant waves made the air sleepy.

Autumn in Gigaro.

Will Graham walked past his kitbags, put down his radio on a sawn off tree stump and tuned in. To the sound of Joni Mitchell he unfolded his chair, and then placed a smaller one to its left.

“Not too close honey,” he said as Eleanor crouched on the undercut bank, bare feet in the tangled grass, and dropped twigs into the slow current, “I didn’t bring any towels. Here.”

She looked up as he approached, reaching up to take the small bottle of juice he’d pulled from his backpack. Will assembled his fishing rod as she fumbled her way to standing, leaving the juice by her indents in the grassy bank, and began searching through the needles for bits that seemed significant only to her.

His gloves chafed. The air had been dry for months, as it cooled, making his lips chap and his skin itch. *The ring ached sometimes, mostly as he drifted off to sleep.* Will scratched through the material and tried not to dwell on it.

Will cast into the dark water and sat back, feeling for the tightening of the line while he watched his daughter silently search between her toes, her red trousers and sky blue top like an impressionist's patch in the gothically obscured background.

His mind took him far from there, even if he wished it wouldn't.

Memories of Wolftrap. Fishing in the river's flow, feeling it push and tug at him while the line flew overhead like a spider's silk. Hannibal sitting on a blanket on the bank, back against a tree while he flipped through a small hardback book in his hands. Chilled passion fruit juice in the sunshine. Feeling utterly at ease in another's presence.

Stained memories, now puzzles to be deconstructed.

When the fish began splashing he was not allowed to continue his reverie. On the wire it jerked and fought. Eleanor looked up, mouth slightly open. It wasn't much of a catch, reeled in, then let out, back in, until it was in the net. Will lifted the net high, the fish inside flipping and twisting, until he got it on the bank. There was a smell of the river in its scales as he picked it up, expertly freeing the hook from its mouth.

Step one, step two, step three...

He could feel Elle watching him. The fish gaped between them, giving up on the struggle as it tried its best to conserve what little was left of its life. Her large eyes looked, past the rainbow sheen on its scales, straight at her father. *It was easy to be judged by those eyes.* Will swallowed and tried to imagine what it was she saw in his actions.

"Then we put it back," Will said, kneeling down and submerging his hands.

He could feel the fish begin to fight wildly as it was returned to its natural environment. When he let go there was a sense of his being the one holding the strings, a cat batting at the fly on the carpet and watching it intently as it struggled to return to the air.

One big game.

As the fish disappeared into the gloom, over the slimy stones and the water washed weeds, Eleanor watched intently. The intensity there wasn't something he appreciated. When she reached out, her hands filled with twigs, and dropped them into the water he felt better for the childish playfulness of the action. They sailed away like bobbing boats, flitting over the ripples. Eleanor waved them goodbye.

"Want to put your feet in?"

He rubbed her back as she nodded, untying his own shoes and helping her to sit just so. The water was cold. The skin at his ankles prickled with goose flesh. He made sure not to get his trousers wet.

“No fish for dinner then?”

A slow head-shake was his reply. Will took a deep breath. They sat for a time, listening to the music and feeling the woods around them, shifting like a great, sleepy beast. Eventually he forced himself away from the memories slinking around behind him, waiting to pounce.

“Ok, I’ll make chicken. You like chicken, don’t you,” he stood up and pulled his spare shirt out the top of his open duffel bag, drying his feet, “come on you little gremlin, let’s go round up the pack.”

“And then the big, bad wolf knocked once...”

Tap. The fire cracked menacingly as, out of sight, Will knocked his knuckles on the bedside table. Elle, curled up in bed with Winston tight to her chest, jumped at the sound. Outside, the storm had grown louder. Rain pelted the windows while the beams and timbers creaked and groaned.

(At the newly acquired holiday villa of Senior Roman Fell, the doorbell rang incongruously just as he and his wife were loading the dishwasher. *A work colleague delivering his papers he was sure,* he told her, *no one would leave him alone when he informed them of his taking leave*. He walked to the entrance hall while the storm blew.)

“Twice.”

Tap.

(The door was checked through the peephole, revealing the porch in darkness; *the light was out*. Fell frowned as he tried the switch, *click, click,* but nothing. He sighed in irritation, mainly because all he’d wanted was peace, and this was wearing on his short temper.)

“Three times,” *tap*, “little pig, little pig, won’t you let me come in?”

(Fell opened the door and stepped out onto the soft wooden boards in his bare feet, looking up at the empty bulb where light should be. Stepping to the right he fumbled for the lantern he kept there, hunching down to open the small glass pane when...)

“Not by the hairs on your chinny chin chin?” Will asked slowly and gruffly.

(...the lights in the house suddenly went out. Fell stood up quickly enough to bash his head on the low cupboard he had been looking through, sending searing agony down his spine. He swore colourfully in Italian before managing to get the lantern lit and stand up. The house was utterly dark. He thought he could hear his wife calling out to him but it was distant. He walked back in through the door, closing and locking it behind him. *Lydia?* He called)

“Well I’ll huff...”

(The light switches gave no quarter, and Fell grumbled, figuring the fuses had tripped. As he walked the hallway and headed back to the kitchen, he made some off-hand derogatory

comments about French electricians while enjoying the elongated shadows thrown by the lantern light.)

"...and I'll puff..."

(The kitchen was empty. *Lydia, are you downstairs?* It always made Fell annoyed when his wife tried to sort problems, mainly because he had no patience for her wishy-washy attitude towards mechanical failures. As he made to put the lantern down on the counter and find the torch under the sink, he stepped in something and slipped badly. He swore in fright as he fell awkwardly to the floor and struggled to right himself, putting his hands in something wet as he turned over onto his knees.)

"...and I'll blow your house in!" Will jumped forwards, forcing a squeak from his daughter.

(It was warm and slightly oily and, the closer he was to it, it reeked. Blood. *Lydia? Lydia are you alright?* He asked in a warbling voice. As he stood, slightly weak kneed at the scare, he came face to face with a tall figure in the gloomy glow of the lantern, smiling softly. *Bonsoir*, was the last word he heard before the knife slid in.)

"Oh Elle," Will let out a soft laugh as he reached forwards to hug her as she sat, wide eyed and scared, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you so badly," the trees beyond the window rustled like torn paper, simultaneously scratchy and soft, "here, you can hit me."

The slap on his hand was short and half-hearted, as Elle refused to let go of Winston.

"I deserved that. Ok, next time I let you pick the story, alright? And don't worry, munchkin, I'm here. No big bad wolves are coming in our door, alright?"

She nodded, though her eyes were still searching the room suspiciously. Will stroked her hair and kissed her forehead as he stood to tuck her in.

"No more stories tonight. You get some sleep and we'll go cycling tomorrow, yeah? Bright and early."

Her Walkman was clicked on, and the headphones slipped over her ears. The faint sound of Nina Simone spilled out, *Ooh Child*, while Will put out the fire and left the embers to burn down. He didn't close the door between their rooms that night, because the idea of the fairy tale seemed suddenly and unnecessarily cruel, enough that he wanted to undo it.

Infecting her childish innocence with hard reality was harsh, even if she wasn't yet ready to understand that the moral of the story was true.

In the bathroom mirror he stared. Reaching up to run his fingertips over the smooth purple flesh where his body had sewn itself back together. Trying to understand the hand that had put it there. *You wanted my heart for safe keeping?* he asked the absent hand, *Or my life for the novelty?*

The storm continued its assault. The branches of the tree outside tapped against his window, as if asking for entrance. *Tap, tap, tap.* Will wished he believed that the wolves were all but

fiction. He wished he did not know that monsters were real.

She should have started by now, only he wasn't willing to push. When he'd asked, '*You want to start school soon?'* , she'd chewed at her bottom lip and stayed perfectly silent. The nearest International School was forty five minutes away by train, far enough to make his gut clench at the very thought of it. *To have her so far out of reach*.

Truthfully he was worried by both points: that Eleanor seemed unwilling to socialize, and that he was becoming used to her muteness.

He started teaching her at home. It was a nice place, if a little over-large for just the two of them. White washed and terracotta tiled, its grounds were extensive enough that they didn't need to worry about strangers, or even neighbours popping by. Up on a hill that led down to the ocean and a long strip of beach, normally deserted due to its inaccessible nature. The slopes were filled with deciduous trees that were in the midst of churning to playful reds and yellows.

Out of the five bedrooms they had chosen one, the master suite, which they shared mainly because Eleanor refused to sleep alone. He'd converted the large walk in cupboard into her room, so that their rooms were joined. Generally she woke once or twice a week, night terrors clinging to her skin as spiders crawling. She would wake him with screams, climbing his body as she said

"The spiders got in, daddy, the spiders got in through the window."

It would take some time to wake her, enough that she could understand the fantasy of it all. It was wearing thin that the only time he heard his daughter speak was in her dreams, or when she spoke to her absent friend as she and *Charlotte* played in the garden together.

He took to making her tapes, of all the music he liked, things he thought she might. *Songs that made him feel safe, or just think of happier times.* He bought an old walkman and dozens of portable headphones.

Now she ran through the house to another's soundtrack, letting the music flow. It made Will feel like he'd made the connection that she wouldn't let him otherwise.

As for the house, other rooms had been annexed. The dining room and the lounge were never used, still ghostly draped in white sheets, as was the exercise suite and the twin garage. Will had opened up the workshop, tacked on the end of the garage in a low, prefab style, and used it for fixing up the beat-up Land Rover and trailer he'd managed to buy for a meagre six hundred and fifty Euros at an auction. It got them from A to B, and he appreciated the distraction it offered his hands. *They were itchy to do more than just fix cars.*

The swimming pool lay covered, a rainbow of leaves floating on the layer of water above the tarpaulin. Sometimes the dogs sniffed at it interestedly, but other than that it sat dejected behind the house under the slowly fading trees.

The dogs themselves loved the space. Sometimes Will didn't see them for days at a time, when they would bound out of the door and head for the wooded hill, below which their vineyard stood like rows of curtains leading down towards the beach. Only Buster seemed to be keen enough to scent out the problems lying in the air: he always stuck around, following Will like a shadow and sometimes sitting and watching Eleanor as she played in the garden where they grew peas and carrots and a host of roots and tubers, or ran through the echoing corridors with her hair in ribbons.

The nearest town was a half hour drive from where they were, *Cap Lardier*, and was a happy cluster of houses, hotels and shops amongst blazing greenery and sunshine. Generally the residents were laid back enough to constitute being horizontal; those that weren't were recognisable as tourists.

Will had taken a few months to re-learn the vague French he did know, and was now into the stage of picking up a local dialect. The shop owners were pleasantly patient with him, which he hadn't expected. He wondered if he was giving off an aura of 'lost and alone' which tended to make Betas and Alphas exponentially more accommodating.

Whichever it was, he was slowly slotting into the swing of things. They bought their chickens at the butcher, *Monsieur Lachard*, and the vegetables they couldn't grow from the grocer, *Madame Valerie*, and the things that made him think of home they found at the little local supermarket, *Kraft chocolate spread and Hershey's Kisses.*

There was no word from home. A few weeks before he had impulse bought a couple of postcards from the tourist shop on the corner of *Boulevard Saint-Michel*, but had yet to fill them out and send them. There was a thrilling and yet isolating joy at being so utterly inaccessible, of being where no one knew who he was or what he had done or expected anything of him above a polite hello and goodbye.

The itch in his hand persisted. *Trying to understand the scars that kept his past real continued to circle his mind.*

Rarely now he woke to the nightmare of paralysed limbs and the iron tang of blood infecting his nose. Rather, his dreams moved in strange circles of love, regret and confusion.

Things moved forwards.

Will simply hoped they were going in the right direction.

"I think you're picking this up faster than I am," Will murmured as he checked Eleanor's text books.

They were clustered by the fire in the sitting room, the guard catching the sparks as the wood crackled. Winter was setting in quickly, far more so than he was used to.

It had been a long time since he'd had to clean out a chimney, and those in the bedroom and the sitting room didn't seem as if they'd seen any work in a long time. There was a bird's nest on top of one, and a dead pigeon in the other.

Then he'd been caught on the hop for wood and coal. Thankfully Monsieur Valerie, the grocer's husband, had called him aside on their last visit and asked if they needed anything. He had smiled under his bushy moustache when Will had simply looked back blankly.

The next day he had come by in an old Citroen to drop off bags of logs, twigs and coal. Will was simply glad his bank wasn't yet waning as he handed over enough to be friendly, but not too much that it seemed showing off.

Though the thought was beginning to weigh on his mind. *Money.* The last thing he wanted to do was be forced to rely on the Lecters for income. Yet the thought of finding a job made him uneasy; he hated the thought of leaving Eleanor with a baby sitter during the day. She was cagey enough as it was.

"Ok, so if I was to give you," he reached out to the bucket of Lego at his left and grabbed a handful, "umm...this many pieces, how many is that?"

He couldn't help but smile as she carefully counted each one onto her fingers, mouthing the numbers. Then she slowly wrote in her notepad, the letters controlled and neat. She handed it to him expectantly.

Huit.

"That's my girl," he ticked it because that was what Miss Jenny used to do with her work, and Elle seemed to appreciate the confirmation of her success, "what about the other thing I taught you with numbers. You remember, from yesterday?"

Nodding, she took the book back and wrote again; *J'ai trois ans*.

"There's no getting past you. Ok," Will checked his watch, "I'm going to get dinner started. You remember that one right?"

A quick squiggle of the pencil, *J'ai faim!* Will laughed and ruffled her hair.

"Ok, we've done your math, we've done your French, we've done your English. You want your colouring pencils and your music?" Eleanor put her books away slowly but nodded to his question, "Alright, you stay here and I'll get them."

It was almost something to be envious of, the speed with which she grasped new concepts. Will knew he was a quick learner, made easier still by his eidetic memory, but even he couldn't work as fast as his industrious daughter. When she wasn't learning her knew tongue, she was drawing or watching films or digging in the garden or running about with the dogs or building little structures from twigs in the arboretum.

He wished he could be as carefree. As the weather drew in, he found the hysterical joy of isolation was turning to a constant itch of loneliness. *It tickled at his scars like insects beneath the skin.* Will wished he was able to ignore it, but it tugged at him, normally at night when he woke to the darkness of his room and the emptiness of his double bed, nightmares clinging to him like strips of cloth. *Tight and constricting*. He would lay, breathing

unsteadily, and be unable to help himself from reaching out to run his hand over the other side of the bed.

It was always cold. At times he couldn't tell what he was expecting. Sometimes he heard Jeff's voice as he opened his eyes, and it clenched in his chest with regret. Other times, he heard...

"Ok, ok," Will said as he entered the kitchen, trailing a line of dogs that he had picked up on his way through the house, "I'll get yours in a minute, alright, just give me..."

He switched on the lights and stopped dead by the counter, breath stuck in his throat. The back door, leading out into the pitch black garden, sat open to the night air like a portent.

Will let out the held breath like a starting pistol and hesitated only a few seconds before he rushed forwards to close it. He fumbled for his keys and locked it tightly before ripping open the cupboard by the fridge to pull out his large Maglite.

Then he went to his study and fished out the one thing he wasn't supposed to have; his nine millimetre handgun. He wasted no time, marching like a soldier, with his army of paws and teeth at his back.

"Eleanor," he said as he entered the sitting room to find her scribbling out a large daisy in whorls of yellow; she reached up and fumbled off her headphones, "I need you in your room, honey, now."

She came without a fight or even a questioning glance. Will wondered, as he led girl and dogs alike through to the bedroom and checked every corner, whether it was all there in his tone; *panic and fear and a hint of elation*. When he cleared the room Will put her on the bed and whistled. The dogs were left with Elle because Will would like to see someone's chances getting through that barrier of teeth and claws before they laid a hand on his daughter.

The only one who wouldn't stay put was Buster. The little Jack Russell cross trotted behind him diligently as Will quietly and meticulously searched each room in turn, flashing the torch's wide beam over the gloom in rooms where the lights didn't work. The sheets draped across the couches and chairs seemed like people seated in them. The legs of the grand piano seemed like feet facing him.

Buster growled only once, but it was enough to have Will raise his gun for the rest of his search.

Nothing. But Will knew it was not nothing. There was no scent on the air, no face in the dark, and yet Will still suspected. *The guilt bit at him as much as it caressed his broken heart.* He forced his shoulders down and he swallowed down the jump in his system. Eyes closed, Will took a long breath and let it out slowly.

Once he had checked all the doors again, sliding home every single deadbolt, he brought Elle and the dogs to the kitchen while he cooked; having them all in one room helped stave off his paranoia. They ate together and then Will let the dogs out for their evening run.

That night he slept light and badly.

The nightmares came in the form of Garret Jacob Hobbs' milky eyes, his gaping mouth . 'You see, Will, you see', he said. Behind him, Francis Dolarhyde's gaping neck split back, his head tumbling open as his crooked teeth danced across the floor as if to answer, 'yes, he sees. He sees us both'.

The itch was getting worse.

It had been a mistake, but one with the best of intentions. The white gold ring was buried like a treasure in a box beneath piles of photographs and a book of ultrasound scans Will had kept. Under the life he was living, was the life he had lived: the ring slid back onto his finger and fit the scar as if it were made to measure. The indentations sat neatly in line, and the purplish flesh of replaced skin was hidden from view.

Only problem being that wearing it opened up a can of worms not so easily resealed.

“Ah, he’s not so innocent after all,” Valerie said with a wide smile under her long nose, jerking her head in Will’s direction as her husband put out sacks of potatoes by the door.

“He’s young and he’s healthy,” her husband shrugged, wiping his chubby hands together; behind him Elle, who always followed the man around the shop intently when they visited, rubbed her hands together too, “that’s no time to be innocent.”

“Yes but he’s *married*, such a rare bird like him out here all on his own,” Valerie said as if scandalised, while she packed up the carrots and leeks for soup that night, and the home made jam and honey he’d bought on whim, “and here we were saying that we thought maybe you’d adopted the little one...”

“*She* was saying,” her husband corrected, long suffering.

“Ignore him,” she waved her hand, “I meant nothing by it. So, are we going to meet him?”

“Oh, no,” Will shook his head with a small, awkward smile, “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

An intake of breath and a guilty stare; Will didn’t bother to correct her assumption, “But you poor dear. I am so sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“Here, you take these. No charge. No, no! Put your money away. Here.”

“Has it been long?” Lonzo asked.

It wasn’t often that Valerie’s husband offered a question. He was something of a silent-muser, always staring at things with an air of extreme concentration before he performed even the smallest task. So much so that Will blinked a few times before answering.

“Nearly four years.”

“Ah, but then you must be so lonely,” Valerie cut in, “I am sure you could find someone here, there are so many handsome men always in my shop. Just the other day, that alpha here buying truffles, Lonzo, what was his name?”

“Doctor Fell, I’m sure,” Monsieur Valerie said as he rummaged through the shelves.

“Thank you,” Will said, taking Eleanor’s hand once she finished following Lonzo around the shop, “but I’m fine. Really. Thank you.”

Selfish.

They trailed a few more of the shops, but the thought weighed on his mind. Eleanor didn’t need to know *him*, he thought tightly, that wasn’t necessary. They had each other and that was enough. More than enough. They didn’t need him.

You’re a coward, Mr. Graham. The memory of Freddie’s voice through the phone. An accusation he could not escape. He was distracted as they turned the corner back towards the parking lot by the supermarket, which was why he didn’t see the other person coming until it was too late.

“Ah, désolé!” the man said, reaching out to steady him, “Ça va?”

“I’m fine,” Will said on instinct, before pulling away and stuttering out, “Ou-Oui, ça va.”

And then it hit. The scent. *Overpowering*, *exquisite, seeping in through his nostrils and straight down to his gut where it churned.* Will thought he might have sucked in the air, just to taste...When he looked up the man was a stranger, though one whose eyes were similarly intent. Will caught merely the vaguest outline of features, *dark hair, blue eyes, squint nose, full lips*, before he blinked rapidly and looked away.

Jesus Christ get a hold of yourself. He felt Eleanor’s hand in his, tugging on his arm. Will felt ill at the realisation. *You need this.*

“Ah, sorry, English?” the man asked in a heavy accent.

“No, it’s fine,” Will shook his head and tried to walk around him; the alpha stepped aside courteously, “I mean je parle un peu français.”

“That’s fine, honestly, it’s good for me to practice,” the man said, smiling; Will felt like his feet were glued to the pavement. *That smell, that intense gaze,* “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Mmm,” Will said, nodding, “sorry, again. I need to go.”

“But then I won’t get a chance to apologise properly. You could give me your name, at least?”

One deep breath. Then another. Will raised his eyes and forced himself to meet the man’s gaze, because he needed to know he was strong enough to do it. *The connection was enough*

to make him want to run, both towards him and away from him. Weak as you are strong.

“Will,” he said softly.

“Eric,” he was told in reply, as the man put his hand to his chest, “so, let me say I am sorry, Will.”

“That’s alright. Really.”

“You’re not a tourist then?”

“Uh, no,” Will shook his head; *am I being picked up?* he thought with latent, desperate humour.

“Good. Then maybe you’ll give me a chance to make it up to you some time.”

“Right,” he said, shaking his head, “I really have to go.”

“Au revior.”

“Salut.”

Home couldn’t arrive fast enough, though it was decisively empty when it did. Will didn’t want to think about how disappointed he was by finding it so. It made him feel ill to think it.

Thoughts of togetherness had led to the summoning of the dream, outwith his control. It was nervously enjoyable, even as he had no choice but to slip into it. The evening had been troubled. He’d felt watched as he dug up beetroots in between the trestles of wilting peas and broad beans before the season passed, but there had been nothing there but clouds in the sky and birds in the trees.

His sleep had been increasingly troubled, *the feeling of hands on his body, the sound of breathing at his neck.* Waking came with nothing but aching muscles and a need to curl in, down and disappear completely.

When the dream came, he was not surprised. Only left hollowed out by it.

Shaky, shimmering dance of light against water, wriggling like strings of pure energy. Warm, balmy air. Evening insects chirping. Utter, calm, relaxation infecting his body.

“It’s not, seriously, that’s not *it.”*

“I am disturbed by your lack of faith in me.”

“Hannibal, you do many things better than I do, you can always hold onto that. But memory is not one of those things. And you’re wrong, no matter how many times you say it.”

Happy and content. He could hear the Reception winding its way melodically behind him, muted beyond the glass, as he leaned back on his palms and swished his feet in the water. His

rolled up trousers dampened but Will had given up caring for social niceties as soon as Hannibal had hidden them outside to the roped off pool area.

The wedding had inured him in social niceties, enough to make him numb to expected politeness.

The hotel surely wouldn't appreciate their dip. Will hoped they were being caught on some security camera somewhere, flaunting the rules like a pair of rebellious schoolboys. It appealed to his love of surrealism: an FBI profiler and one of the country's top surgeons, kicking chlorinated water into dead air.

"The lyrics go 'we're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year'. Don't question my backlog of prog-rock. I have dozens of teenage catalogues up here," Will tapped his head, "all taking up valuable space that could probably be used for better things."

"But which you now value, no doubt, as it is clearly allowing you to one up me," Hannibal said, leaning forwards to look at his wobbly reflection between his knees.

"Oh and I do love to one up you," Will let his head hang back and stared up at the night sky, stars obscured by cloud, "gets you all riled up under that stoic shell. Frantic to exceed me."

Hannibal's mouth ticked as he tried to suppress his smile. Will reached out and ran his fingers through the muggy air, trailing down the white cotton of Hannibal's arm.

"There is no exceeding eccentricity," Hannibal countered, "Do you truly think I stand on ceremony when it comes to us? I care not if you have a ring on your finger, as long as we are one and the same. Perhaps I simply wished to compound us with this ritual; an exponential coupling of mind and body."

"Down boy," Will let out a short laugh, "or I'll think you're trying to recruit me for world domination."

"Most people are. I think the only reason you are here now is that I make a better argument than Jack Crawford."

"Ouch," Will faux-winced, scratching under his right ear, "trying to say I'm in this for the self abuse? You should have put that in your vows. That would have got a laugh."

"No," Hannibal said, "I think I prefer the idea that intimacy alters perception."

"It's the superiority complex and the witty sarcasm," Will said facetiously, as if to himself, "That must be what kept me coming back."

"You see yourself all the clearer with me in your head."

"Mmm, and you are happier trying your best to resist me getting into yours."

"How presumptuous. The compassion in you fights with the rest bubbling up from beneath."

“It’s a thin line,” Will murmured, “between compassion and cruelty. We hop back and forth across it, sneaky, not making a sound. When you proposed I was so damned angry at the noose of control you were slipping round my throat, and so madly in love with you the next as you tightened it. Sometimes...I feel like I don’t know where I’ll go next.”

When Hannibal remained quiet, Will looked to his right. Maroon eyes were watching him intently, underlit by cerulean blue from the water’s edge.

“You worry,” Hannibal stated.

“I always worry.”

“But yours is far more sinister than the run of the mill. You fear you do not know yourself. And I am quite sure I know you better than you know yourself, darling.”

“And there’s the pathological product of your biology creeping out again.”

“You say the sweetest things,” Hannibal leaned in to nuzzle his neck; Will laughed softly and kissed Hannibal before pushing him away.

“Ah, we’re all pathological in our own ways. Insanity is rarely that black and white.”

“We’re all weird?” Hannibal suggested, and Will nodded.

“Look where I am and what I’m doing. Who talks about this kind of stuff after their wedding? We should be dancing and getting drunk and embarrassing ourselves, not talking about all the little dips in the road. But we are. And it’s fucking glorious.”

“Crudely but perfectly phrased.”

“See,” he lifted his feet out of the water and watched the droplets fall, “you get it. You always get it. We’re compatibly weird.”

“It takes a lot of guts to appreciate respective weirdness.”

“I think we do pretty well.”

“Yes we do.”

The water wriggled and slopped as Hannibal stood, helping Will up with a powerful pull. Somewhere a door opened, spilling out music and voices. Will watched Hannibal closely as his husband positioned him, one arm up, the other placed at Hannibal’s side.

“Then we should dance, drink and embarrass ourselves,” Hannibal said as he took Will’s hand and stepped him forwards.

“Just like all the normal people?” he asked.

“Perish the thought.”

Will pushed himself closer and fixed his eyes on the space between them as they danced, apart from the others: close but never quite close enough. Hannibal wouldn't allow it.

He could wait. Will was good at waiting.

"How much longer till they realise we're missing?"

"Physically or metaphorically?"

"Both," Will said with a closed eye smile as they circled each other, joined at hands and hips.

"Some time yet, dearest. Some time yet."

This time waking did not come with the ache of unfulfilled sleep. It came with sweat and panicked breathing and clawing his way from the covers as he stumbled, disoriented, towards the bathroom in the dark. He bumped his hip hard against the sink, making him trip against the wall. His head cracked against the tile and Will crumpled, his vision dancing with antsy darkness. His chest was pulled awkwardly by the angle of his body, making the muscles scream.

Someone tried to open him up. The paramedic's voice.

I use the word sounders without advisement. The Ripper doesn't see his victims as people, but more like pigs for slaughter. His own voice from years before, teaching his rapt class at Quantico.

He would never hurt you. Murasaki's voice, so sure and controlled.

Staring up through the darkness as the pain crawled over his skin, Will Graham thought he could hear himself panting choked sobs as if he were listening to another person altogether.

Closing his eyes merely offered him the same darkness.

It had taken swallowing his pride and admitting that it could be worse than he thought. That had led to a phone call and an appointment and being forced to recite the symptoms one after the other to the doctor behind his desk. Doing so drove home just how bad he had allowed it to become.

"As far as I'm concerned," the doctor said as he sat back in his chair, the small office bright and slightly cluttered, "this sounds like a cut and dry case of Barnes-Gilmore Syndrome. You've heard of it, I assume?"

Will nodded, though he was sure it was redundant to do so. He was sure there wasn't an omega he knew who hadn't heard of BGS. Severe hormone imbalance, affecting neurological and homeostatic systems in the body, resulting from the loss of or distance from a bonded mate. The body needed the signals given by the sight and smell of their other. Without it, even suppressants and replacement therapies were mere placebos.

Further than serious drugs, only time healed. Will was finding out the hard way that reconnecting with Hannibal had left him open to losing his built up resistance. *It had been so long since it had been this bad.* After the shooting, Will had been laid up in hospital not only by his wound, but the clawing need to be near to Hannibal. BGS had nearly killed him.

“It’s not my first time,” he said, swallowing.

“Ah, I see. Well, then you’ll be familiar with the treatment,” the doctor began typing on his computer, pushing his glasses up his nose as he did so. Will knew what was coming. Every day treatments wouldn’t work. He would bring out the big guns.

“I’ll start you on a heavy dose, as the symptoms you described sound quite severe and your personal circumstances, well, they are not ideal. So, one injection now, and one more in two weeks, just to begin with. In between I want you to take Salpol. Have you had this before?”

“Yes,” Will said, jaw tight.

“Excellent, then you will not need me lecturing you on the side effects. You know how it works, and I will only advise you to be very careful with the dosages. Any nausea, any dizziness, any sleepwalking, you come straight to me and we’ll revise everything. And of course I can’t keep you on the suppressants while in therapy. No mixing your drugs, yes Mr. Graham?”

“Uh huh,” was all he was able to say.

The injection hurt badly as it was forced into the muscle in his thigh, stinging like a wasp. He left with a prescription in his hands that he felt like tearing up. Salpol didn’t aim to treat the symptoms of withdrawal like other drugs did; instead it effected neuroreceptors and neurotransmitters to essentially switch off the areas that dealt with it in the first place. Will remembered the side effects; *irrational mood swings, dulled sensitivity, among others.*

He didn’t want to take it, pure and simple, but then he thought of Eleanor, playing in the waiting room with the receptionist, and dutifully took it to the pharmacy. He was informed the pills would have to be ordered in.

It had never been this bad, not since...not since he’d first moved to Miami. Not since he’d put himself in the ocean with no want to return.

Standing in the doorway, watching as Eleanor built a small tower from brightly coloured blocks, Will promised himself he would never let it come to that. Never again.

“Well, it’s nice to know I didn’t scare you off completely.”

The cafe was small and quaint, and the sun was warm enough to allow them a seat on the terrace even if the air was verging on nippy. Will drank a strong black coffee from an antique cup, Eleanor a hot chocolate and Eric a cappuccino. Will hadn’t been able to help but stare at the chocolate powder atop the white foam and feel as if history was repeating itself.

The taste of bitter coffee and caramel kisses.

They'd met up four times so far, always with Eleanor at his side. If she was there, then it couldn't be anything more than polite conversation. The wedding ring had been a short lived experiment, now back in its buried box beneath the 'X' marks the spot. Without it, he felt the deception could be played safely.

The Salpol was working, even if it made him unpredictable. Will yawned but hid it behind his hand. The medication made him drowsy. Enough to resent it, but be too lethargic to care. He simply hoped that, with time, he would no longer need it.

"Not at all," Will shrugged, opening a small sachet of sugar which Elle had given to him; he stirred it into her drink and thought he caught the sound of David Bowie's *Life on Mars* seeping out from her headphones, "I'm used to being hunted."

"A little extreme, no?"

"Not really. But..." Will took a drink and swallowed the bitter liquid, savouring the rich flavour, "an acquired taste."

"Rightly so," Eric smiled.

Simple and easy to understand, that was how he would describe Eric Lefevre. His motivations were clear cut and predictable, his words were carefully calculated to get what he wanted, and Will considered him passably handsome. *An author who'd come to the South for inspiration; a dreamer with a need for power and control, and indulged enough to expect his own way no matter what.* Will knew who he was as soon as their first real conversation was over and done with, walking along the promenade. At times Will rebuked himself for being so objective. It was how he had been with Jeff, at first. Only he had ended up losing control of that situation as he fell in love without realising he'd allowed it.

No room for making the same mistake twice. This was strictly business. His body needed it, even as his mind was free to hate himself for the lack of connection. *Or for remembering the connection it needed.*

"So," Eric asked, "you moved here on a whim then?"

"Umm, well, a change of scenery is probably more accurate."

"Then you were fed up of the sunshine in Miami and thought you would trade it for the sunshine her in Gigaro? A fair swap. Though I'll admit our summers will not rival home, and our winters are prickly."

"Home is a bit of a lax word right now," Will moved on quickly when Eric's eyes grew sharp with curiosity, "But you were asking me something earlier, when you were ordering?"

"What? Right, yes!" Eric clicked his fingers and tapped his finger on the table, "actually there's something on tonight I thought you might like."

"Oh?"

“One of my friends from my old university days is in town, has been invited to bash of sorts. A recital, up at the Le Carre Saint Maxime. Pavel Haas quartet are playing Dvorak. He gave me two tickets, told me they’re spectacular.”

“I...” Will hesitated, *weren’t expecting that, were you?* “Well, I’d love to but...”

“If it’s for the little beau then my brother would be more than happy to watch her for the evening. He has two girls, seven and nine. They are charm itself. Honestly, it will be no trouble, I swear.”

A hint of desperation in his planning and his tone. Will knew he’d been cagey since he’d given in and started seeing Eric, touching at a minimum, always just out of his reach but close enough to be a temptation. It was always enough to drive an alpha crazy if they were refused the treat at the end of the string for too long. Will knew his instinct was to resist, but the medication made him reckless. *As did the want to prove he could do this alone.*

“Alright.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Well...fantastic. I can pick you up if you like, I’ll drive to Robert’s and I promise,” he turned to Elle and put his hand on his heart, “I’ll have him back by midnight.”

In reply she picked up another sugar packet and handed it to Eric. The man looked vindicated, even as he shook it vigorously before ripping it open and pouring it into her cup.

“You’re too sweet already for all this sugar!”

That night he felt on edge as they drove towards the theatre, *leaving Elle silent with the smiling family in their comfortable home*. They had been pleasant and normal, disturbingly so. Such a contrast between he and Elle, and them. Enough to make him uncomfortable.

He used it as the excuse for why he couldn’t concentrate on the sharp, Slavic melodies crying from the violins as the cello and the viola crooned a low backdrop. His legs felt stiff and hands stayed as fists placed tightly on his thighs, *even as the feeling of bitter connection crept about the floor as if searching for him.*

Even as the itch in his hand was so intense he felt the need to dig his nails in and rip the flesh open.

Even as the feeling of eyes on the back of his neck made his heart arrhythmic.

Every few minutes the burning need to look over his shoulder seared at his calm. They were the first to leave as the audience cheered and clapped, Will with his eyes on the ground and Eric concernedly frustrated by his side.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” Eric asked as he dropped them back at the villa, jerking up the handbrake.

“Fine,” he lied, chewing at the inside of his mouth as his shoulders tensed.

“You know you don’t look fine.”

“Oh I know that. I know that well enough.”

They were walked to the front door, *Will still distracted*, and were greeted by a host of paws, tongues and barks. Eleanor lifted Winston into the air like a talisman and ran inside smiling as the dogs trailed after her. The sight was enough to arrest Will’s waning attention. He felt his mouth curl slightly upwards as he looked down to find Buster, dutifully sitting at the doorway, unmovable.

He turned to thank Eric for the evening. Instead he found himself taken by the shoulders and pushed back by a kiss against the wall. The surprise slowed his reaction, even as the biology within him warred with itself while their bodies pressed tightly; *so far from and yet so close to what he wanted*.

A few seconds ticked by before he managed to reach up and gently push. Low in his throat, Buster growled, standing up to his unimpressive one and a half feet.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Will said slowly as he was released.

Eric let out an incredulous puff of breath through his nose, “What, are you just-just...” he shook his head and rubbed at his mouth, “Ca t'amuse de m'emballer?”

“Je ne t'ai pas demandé de m'embrasser.”

“Laisse tomber!” he snapped out disgustedly, “Tu...no, I’ll tell you, *you* need something else. Making out you’re all open for me, huh?” as he stepped forwards menacingly.

When Will didn’t move back Eric seemed to falter. The stare he was given cut deep as their eyes met. Hearing Eleanor in the background, running with the pack, forced his deep need for control higher than the instinctual need to cower. When Will stepped forwards, Eric backed down onto the stairs.

“I think you should go,” Will said icily.

“Je t'emmerde,” Eric spat, before turning to leave.

Buster barked out a hasty warning. The red tail lights shone angry and disdainful, disappearing into the growing night. Will stood on the porch and watched them leave. Around him the trees swayed sonorously and the sky winked with stars. His house was alive with the sounds of oblivious happiness as dogs and child played.

Will Graham curled his left hand into a fist, his nails digging into the skin until they sprung up in crescents of red.

The wind seemed to whisper the truth to him. *There was no substitution. It did not exist.*

He wondered when the *tap, tap, tapping* would start.

It was snowing when the first knock came.

Through a wall of sound, Ted Nugent's *The Great White Buffalo* on full blast in his small workshop, the pounding of a fist on wood could only just be heard. Will looked up from his work, whetstone in his right hand, axe pressed to the edge of the table. The smell of metal filings filled his nose, as did the dust of the old building stuffed with friendly spider's webs and scuttling beetles living in cardboard boxes to stave off the winter freeze.

He waited until it came again before walking over to flick off the music. It left a buzz in his ears as he opened the door.

"Well, that's one hell of a welcome," Jack Crawford said as he looked at Will, freshly sharpened axe dangling in his left hand.

"Jack," Will said with low level surprise, for lack of trying harder; he looked down at the axe and shrugged, "Eleanor wants her own Christmas tree. Come inside, it's freezing out here."

In the house Will made coffee in his tall cafetiere and Crawford hung up his coat and took off his shoes. Will offered slippers from the utility room when Jack realised the tiled kitchen floor was freezing cold. They sat at the breakfast bar while the snow fell beyond the long, low windows, with the smell of baking bread in the oven. In the background Eleanor could be heard with Buster and the others in the sitting room down the hall, listening to her tapes.

When Jack took his first sip Will couldn't help but laugh as he grimaced.

"Jesus. How much did you put in there? Enough caffeine to power a jet engine."

"Sorry. Force of habit. I like it strong. Milk?"

"Please," Jack stirred it in until the coffee became acceptable.

"So," Will said, cradling his cup, "is this just a casual call? I don't see a housewarming gift."

"They were out of houseplants at the airport," Jack quipped.

"Then...I assume it's business."

"Can't they be one and the same?"

"They always are. You got somewhere to stay?"

"I was thinking I'd look up the hotels when I got here."

“Don’t bother,” Will sighed, rubbing at his eyes and sitting back in his chair, “we’ve got room.”

“Thanks,” another sip of coffee, “I appreciate that.”

Will made pork chops with mustard and rosemary sauce, with fresh bread on the side. They ate in the sitting room with the fire roaring full like a wild beast in the corner. Eleanor dipped her bread in her sauce and speared her pre cut pork with her fork, looking at it carefully before every bite.

Jack, in his thick cream jumper, seemed fascinated by her behaviour, although there was a glint of fatherliness in his gaze that Will forgave him for. Will was sure Jack was feeling the itch to protect, just as he did.

“She’s still not talking?” Jack, reclining in his chair, rolled the stem of his wine glass between his fingers.

Will shook his head, “She’s thinking about it.”

“Oh?”

“I’m sure she’ll tell me when she’s ready to start again.”

“I’m sure,” Jack said, looking up as Will made to clear the table, “No. You cooked. It’s the least I could do.”

When Jack returned from washing dishes, Will was alone in the armchair by the fire, having put Eleanor to bed early with a promise to not leave her alone too long. He could feel Jack’s hesitation, as much as he could sense the heavy tension in the air.

The opposite armchair was taken. Jack sat down with a deep inhale of breath, which he let out in a loud sigh as he watched the flames. Will leaned over to top up his glass.

“I have a feeling,” Will said as he did the same to his own, finishing the bottle, “we’re going to need it.”

“Maybe.”

“So. Four thousand mile trip. Something call you here, Jack?”

“You’ve not been keeping up with the local news?”

“Purposefully not.”

“Right. Well, makes sense. If you had you wouldn’t be asking me why I’m here.”

Jack sat forwards, elbows on his knees and hands clasped. He looked at Will seriously.

“Two towns over, Les Myrtes, double homicide. Found in the woods near Pointe de Bonporteau. Couple of campers found them. Skinned, teeth removed, unidentifiable.”

“They have nothing?”

“Man and woman. Mid to late thirties. Tourists are a best guess, because none of the locals are missing. Nothing more than that.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because when the coroner did his report, it showed up not what was there, but what wasn’t,” Jack kept Will’s gaze steady, even as he wanted to look away, “liver removed from the male, kidneys from the female, and the wounds re-sown. I had any anomalous report of organ removal flagged through our system as a priority.”

Silence but for the fire crackling. Will liked to think he could hear the snow falling on the house, in a large silent *shush* of frozen crystals hitting tile. He scratched at his right eye and chewed at the inside of his bottom lip.

“I know you wouldn’t want to...”

“I’m not involved, Jack.”

“You’re already involved. You’re the reason he’s here.”

“You don’t even *know* he’s here.”

“Oh come on,” Jack said disparagingly, sitting back and shaking his head; genuine anger, Will could see it, even as Jack tried to temper it, “Les Myrtes is less than an hour’s drive. I know him just as well as you do when it comes to *this*,” Jack pointed at Will, “maybe even better than you. I know how alphas think, and I know how fiercely they guard their property.”

“I was never his property. Just his diversion.”

“I don’t need your blind innocence act, not now.”

“You’ve never needed it, but *I* need it. Eleanor needs it. I’m not involved Jack, and neither are you. Who did you bribe to let you have this case, huh? I know you weren’t given it, that’s for sure. But you can’t leave it alone, because you feel responsible, so *damn* responsible for everything. For me, for Hannibal, for every scar and cut. You want to make it all better by putting the cuffs on him yourself, don’t you.”

Jack allowed Will his speech, waiting till he was done to look up and say:

“I wasn’t the one who let him go.”

I don’t want to know where you are or what you do. The echo of his voice marred by shaking exhaustion, nausea and pain. Will closed his eyes and swallowed the memory like a bad meal, washing it down with a gulp of merlot. The wine seemed to sting like bile. When he opened his eyes he was looking at the fire.

“I thought you didn’t want to know what happened that night.”

“I don’t need to ask. I never needed to. I just wanted it to be easy enough to stop the brick shithouse we’d built ourselves into collapsing down on *you*, and it was. Until the consequences came back to bite us.”

“Was I wrong then?” Will asked through a frown, “Is this personal, or did they make you take the case to keep your job?”

“Does it matter?”

Will studied the lambent flames. They curled like inviting fingers. When he closed his eyes they were emblazoned onto his lids like faint echoes.

“Not really.”

“Then help me on this one.”

“I can’t.”

“You *won’t*. There’s a difference. You think that makes life any better for those poor dead bastards left for the crows? You want me to tell you how he arranged them? I have photos.”

“And I have enough nightmares to keep me company at night, Jack,” Will said as he stood, finishing the rest of his glass in two large gulps, “I’ll make up your room.”

They didn’t say goodnight. Will lay awake, staring at the ceiling as the candle on his bedside cabinet flickered in an unseen breeze. The duvet was heavy with extra blankets, and the room was chill. He thought he could smell the pine needles if he tried hard enough, feel the freezing air against his cheeks as if he were out in the open.

Above him, the exposed red muscle was displayed on limbs and torsos, as his imagination filled in the gaps; the coupled corpses, *joined by the hands,* laid on a bed of rocks, arms wide as their toothless mouths gaped for the sky to see. A tapestry of forever, a place where they would always be one.

As he drifted to sleep, he thought he could feel blood pool before dripping onto his cheek.

To mark the guilty.

Despite extensive work with the local gendarme, Jack left three days before Christmas, with no proof linking the killing to Hannibal Lecter. It seemed there had been another suspicious murder in Geneva that had the FBI higher ups more excited than their local fiasco had. Will was sure that Purnell and Conrad would be desperate enough to see Lecter in every kill across Europe. If Jack didn’t come up with the goods, they would pounce on the next new thing like kittens on a shiny ball of tinfoil.

Somehow they managed to leave each other on decent terms. Will wasn’t sure if it was due to Jack’s affection for Eleanor, *the FBI Special Agent had joined them on their snow adventure to find just the right Christmas tree for the sitting room, freshly chopped with Will’s axe,* or

his disenchantment with chasing Lecter, *hunting an old friend who'd deceived you more than once was enough to cut at anyone's resolve*.

Whichever it was, he had allowed Will to drive him to the airport.

"I'd ask you to call if you hear of anything, but I feel I'd be wasting my time."

"If he knocks on my door," Will said as he indicated before turning into the drop off point, "I'll be sure to let you know."

A soft laugh and a shake of the head; Jack Crawford looked mildly sad as he looked to his left. Will flinched when he realised exactly where he was looking. *As if he could see through the layers of jacket and sweater to the twin purple scars scissoring across his chest.*

"No you won't."

"Jack..."

"We both have to live with it," Jack interrupted, "I just thought that, after everything he'd done, you would know when to stop."

"He didn't want me dead," Will shrugged.

"That's a nice theory."

"It's difficult to die, when you're living on inside another."

"That's what you think?" Jack asked, incredulous.

"No," Will shook his head and caught Jack's gaze, "but it's what he thinks."

A pause, filled with the muted sounds of muffled airport tannoy announcements. Jack looked as if he wanted to ask more, but instead said,

"Let's just...just try and make of it what we can."

"I've been trying to."

"You have to do what's right by you, but remember what's right by her too, ok? Remember what's right by her."

Will hoped that he knew. He hoped that one day she would open her mouth and tell him she forgave him.

And that he would deserve it when she did.

Christmas Eve rolled around with the novelty of a white Christmas and the barrenness of a meagre four presents under the tree; all for Eleanor. *His bank account was wilting faster than its green pine needles.*

Will had found a box of old decorations in the attic, good quality but slightly faded. They'd chosen the sitting room as the festive space and Will had moved the large television and his second hand DVD player through.

"You want to watch..." Will picked up the two DVDs he'd managed to find in the bargain bin that had subtitles instead of a French dub, "Never Ending Story or Muppet's Christmas Carol?"

She bounced up and down as he held up the first again.

"Never Ending Story? Ok, your choice kiddo," he said.

After the first twenty minutes she was in floods of tears as the horse sank into the swamp, and Will regretted ever picking the damnable film up in the first place. The magical and well timed resurrection of the animal at the end of the film didn't seem to make a difference. *Will couldn't stand the sight of her sorrow.*

"Come on, it's alright, it's just a story, don't worry," he said, feeling strained as he rubbed at her arms.

The last thing he needed was more stress. This time of the year was hard enough as it was.

"I'll make hot chocolate, yeah?"

When she pushed him away and started struggling form the couch, Will took a deep breath.

"Eleanor," he said, trying to stop her, his voice turning harsh "come on, sweetheart, don't..."

Leaving her to run from the room seemed the only option, as his raw nerves sang with the need to shout. When she threw a tantrum, Will knew there was no fixing it until she calmed down on her own. Just before her third birthday she had managed to hide from him for four hours, only sulking out of her room because she smelled he was cooking bacon sandwiches for lunch. Unfortunately the same thing could be said of him; the drugs gave him a nasty habit of a short temper.

He made hot chocolate, the motions soothing in their familiarity. When he went to her room she was curled up with her back to him on the bed, headphones in place. The warm mug was left on the little bedside table he had built her, painted with festive green trees and little red reindeer. He kissed the top of her head and tried not to think about what had upset her.

Not a fear of death, but a fear of unknown loss. A fear of not knowing whether the promise of return was true or simply a convenient lie. Jack's promise of Elle's forgiveness '*as long as she gets you back*' was starting to sound hollow.

In his room Will leaned against the wall and curled his fingers into his hair, pulling tightly. Four months since they'd touched down on European soil, and Will couldn't have felt further from home. *Further from his hard won sanity.* Before, when he'd lain on the humid heat of his front porch by the lapping waves, he'd dreamed of what could have been.

Now Will couldn't afford himself that same luxury. Reality was the only drug capable of keeping him on the straight and narrow.

Until the knock came.

Will had been passing through the large and empty front entrance hall on his way from the bedrooms to the kitchen when it happened. The sound was echoing and somehow courteous. Will, stopped dead in the middle of the dirty tiled floor, stared at it. *You knew it would come,* you knew as soon as you told him to leave that it wasn't an option he'd ever consider.

Little pig, little pig, let me come in?

There was a need to ask, *'who's there'*, but the answer would have been too damning.

Will took a step forwards.

She needs you to be strong for her.

Past the small table holding a bust of some dour faced male ancestor, guilty with dust on his carven hair.

You don't need him, you never needed him.

His hand reached out and twisted back the lock, hearing the metal shirk.

Because you can't lie to yourself forever.

The door opened to dark dusk and frozen snow, and on the crisp, grey ground a trail of footsteps.

One trail leading up to the door, with no others retreating. Will stared down at it as the chill air crept in, pinching at his face as if testing the waters. The cold metal of the door handle stung his skin, forcing him to let go. He looked up as he stepped out, looking back and forth across the hidden driveway, lined by darkening, skeletal trees.

The snow crunched under his shoes. Will felt his heart beat faster with every step, and with each a lessening ability to question why he had turned the lock, why he had opened the door, why he was even out here in the first place. The sky above him seemed too far away, and the space around him too open and lonely. His hands found each other and rubbed as he scanned from side to side, looking over his shoulder only once.

The circular scar ground around angrily.

At the lump of snow half covering the dead fountain in the courtyard, Will stopped as cold water began seeping in through the eyelets of his shoes. Shivering, he hugged himself and thought he felt his chest complain. *Memories of a past life he wished would have the consideration not to haunt him.*

His voice was low and circumspect, almost hopeful as he asked the night air, "Hannibal?" in a puff of milky breath.

No reply. *Did you expect one?* Will blinked and looked down at the ground, at his own crisp footsteps in the snow, over the top of the ones he knew would be there.

He followed them back to the house dutifully, holding himself tightly around the middle as he did, skipping up the short stairs and closing the door behind him, *locked with a snap.* Alone once more.

Until he looked up.

There, in front of the bust, sat two small parcels in brown paper wrapping. Will stood, staring at them, before looking down to find wet footprints on the dusty floorboards. One track in, one track out.

Darling.

The parcels were snatched up with furious hands. Will marched to the sitting room, his breathing erratic as he sped through the halls. When he found the fire still dancing merrily he pulled the grate out forcefully using the poker and took the first parcel in hand.

Fire cleanses, the memory of the voice was painful to hear, rough and dead and vengeful.

You killed him, his conscience reminded unhelpfully. Will wavered, looking down at the parcel with wary but eager eyes.

There, on a simple tag, the name *Eleanor* in graceful, cursive script. It shook before his eyes and for a moment he couldn't understand why. When he realised his hand was shaking he dropped one parcel to the carpet, then the other, and stumbled from the room.

In the corridor he fumbled his hands along the corridor wall, holding him up even as his knees weakened and he sank slowly to the ground. The chill floor seeped through his jeans while he leaned against the wall, heaving in lungfuls of air, eyes squeezed shut.

"Don't leave me here," he managed to huff out, tears pouring from his eyes, "please, please don't..."

The world seemed to spin. He felt sick. When a hand touched his hair Will started badly, pushing back against the wall and staring, blurry eyed, at the culprit. Eleanor looked him in the eyes, her bottom lip tucked firmly between her teeth. When she toddled forwards and wrapped her arms around his neck Will cracked.

"Oh god, I'm sorry sweetheart," he sobbed, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't cry daddy," she said, "I sorry I made you sad."

Her voice was low and careful, but Will didn't care. All he could hear was her forgiving him. It came like a tidal wave as he held her tightly and buried his face in her hair, wiping his sins clean from the blighted landscape of his love.

That night, Will Graham prepared.

Morning sun.

Will lifted a lazy hand and shielded his closed eyes from the red glare.

Hazy music. *Eleanor must be awake.*

One eye cracked open, sticky with sleep, and blinked at his alarm clock: *seven fifteen in the morning*. With a deep sigh Will rolled his head back to centre and stared up at the ceiling, its familiar crack from the central light fitting splitting out like a spider's web.

He dressed quickly before sneaking to her room with a feeling of excitement and a ready smile. When he opened the door the bed was open but empty, covers pulled back and rumpled. Will stood, smile falling away.

The music rose for a moment, echoing through the closed door to his bedroom as if from miles away. Will felt a chill on his arms and grabbed his heavy housecoat, slipping it on. When he opened the door out into the corridor, he found Buster laying dutifully to the right. The little dog looked up at him mournfully, head cocked.

"Morning boy," he said, hunkering down to scratch between his ears; Buster yawned, "you seen any other pups this morning?"

Buster stood up with a long stretch, front paws pushed out, and began trotting down the hall. The morning light threw the north wall into a panoply of shadows and bright light as Will followed the little, light paws. The music, *now identifiable as piano*, grew louder with every step. When Buster turned right into the disused lounge, Will hesitated at the door. Standing against the wall, he stared at the side of the doorframe and swallowed.

He knew the song. It made his insides curl. *I know that song.* Creeping forwards was like stepping back in time. Will reached the wooden frame, leaning around it in one soft motion.

With the curtains pulled back the ghostly room, with its white sheets, seemed bright and airy. Only the glossy black of the grand piano shone out like polished ebony, the light hitting it just-so to create a warped halo upon the open lid.

The bench was small but Eleanor fit on the left side of the cushion, peering up at the hands that flew across the keys; *Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G minor*. Slowly, Will took his first steps into the room and reached out, picking Eleanor up from the bench. She let out a soft protest, until he took her place and sat her on his knee, next to the man who *should not have been there.*

"He's teachin me the piano," she said excitedly, "he said he was your friend and that he's been lookin' for us. Is he your friend daddy?"

"Something like that."

"Daddy, daddy," she said, squirming to turn in his hold, "did you know? He has my eyes! Look, he has my eyes!"

It was difficult to do both, *to look and not to look*. Eventually, when their eyes met, Will found he hadn't the opportunity for an overreaction. His body felt utterly at ease, even as his mind raced.

Hannibal watched him calmly. His hair was slightly longer than he had seen it last, falling down into his right eye. He looked slightly tired, as if he hadn't been getting enough sleep, *he always remained a little puffy eyed if forced to wake too early.* It was utterly natural, *even as it stung*, to reach up with his left hand and push that hair back, carding his fingers through soft strands until they sat in line with the rest.

"No, sweetheart," Will said softly as Elle strained to see, "you have his."

An arm slid up around his back as Will laid his head on Hannibal's shoulder, breathing deeply as the scent entered his body like a sonorous perfume. With his right Hannibal continued to play, tripping out a complex melody.

"Shall we show your father what you learned while he was asleep?" Hannibal asked, making Eleanor nod and grin.

Will watched through half lidded eyes, at a slant, as Hannibal played in time with the stumbling but determined efforts of his daughter's fingers. A memory outwith a memory; *a dream he might have had once, of them together*. No specifics, just a feeling of contentment. Happiness.

Not something that could be imposed upon another, just something one had to find for themselves.

Hannibal had brought a hamper from town, filled with delights. Will recognised the caviar that Valerie sold, in a small black and gold glass jar, as well as the vegetables she kept, still dirty from palates in the store.

The handsome Doctor Fell, he thought, *charming his way through Will's background life like a shadow waiting to rejoin with its severed body.*

A leg of lamb, wrapped in muslin cloth, was rubbed with rosemary and oil before being put in the oven surrounded by cracked halves of garlic and chard. Will heated a frying pan, watching as Hannibal moved around the kitchen with purpose, knowing where every object was with practiced ease. Will wondered how many summers he had spent here, before the Lecters had moved exclusively to America.

Outside, Eleanor played in the snow, puffed up in her winter coat, hat and wellingtons as she threw snowballs for the dogs. Elated squeals rang out every time the dogs chased the flying balls, bemused and tails wagging as they sniffed the ground where it hit and disappeared.

Will heated a small packet of blinis until the small pancakes were crisped and showing brown. *Remembering their first Christmas together, when Hannibal seemed to revel in spoiling him more than usual. They'd had gold flecked truffles and Will had laughed at*

Hannibal's want for smoked salmon and caviar, unable to stop even as he was fed it carefully from eager fingers.

"Open," Will said as he held up a morsel, bedecked in just that; Hannibal obliged, taking the treat and biting down through the spongy base. Will ate the other half while Hannibal slipped his hand around his waist and held him close, "Eleanor doesn't like red meat. I bought a chicken, I'll cook that too. Maybe put it on in about half an hour, that'll have them ready together."

"I thought I would make silk pie for desert?" Hannibal said as he handed Will a mimosa, freshly squeezed and bubbled.

"Show off," Will said after a fizzy sip that tickled his tongue; he looked up to find maroon eyes staring into his. The kiss wasn't unprecedented, but it was difficult to handle. His skin tingled pleasantly on his arms, not so pleasantly at his chest where the phantom pain twitched and pulled. Hannibal wasted no effort, pulling their bodies flush as he explored Will slowly and meticulously.

Shamefully, Will knew he'd missed it when he could hear his left hand spilling his drink carelessly onto the floor while he offered himself as a free meal. By the time they were done their parting left a wet sound in the air and Will's cheeks flushed. Hannibal's eyes showed tightly controlled want.

"You bring it out in me, a need to spread my plumage."

"It's not the only thing," Will said, swallowing the guilt that threatened to rise.

"Oh?"

"The Fells, Doctor," Will said strictly, taking a drink from what was left in his glass, "I'm guessing it wasn't a personal grudge."

"Only a necessary evil," Hannibal said; Will licked his lips and looked down to the plate of blinis, sitting neatly under the sour cream, smoked salmon and baubles of caviar, "although his books were a blight to the academic world. I do hope Jack didn't cause you too much distress."

"No," Will said, eyebrows raised, looking outside as Eleanor ran past, "he doesn't have enough practice. That's your department."

"Do you trust me?" he was asked plainly as the room began to effuse with wonderful smells of cooking meat and citrus.

"Not entirely."

"Are you taking into consideration my beliefs about your intentions?"

"*My* intentions?"

"Human motivation can be little more than lucid greed."

“Greed and blind optimism,” Will added.

“You’re optimistic I will not kill you.”

“Optimism and pessimism don’t come into it. It took some time, enough to believe I know why you tried in the first place.”

“You do?”

Will nodded softly, staring out of the window; he kept Hannibal in his peripheral vision as he spoke, still entwined in his arms, “you wanted to keep me close. You were worried that it would be your only chance to; closer than anyone could be. You thought...you thought I wouldn’t give you the opportunity to have this. And now I’ve replaced that with something else.”

Hannibal watched him, his eyes slightly downcast. Will wondered if he was doing as Jack had done, *seeing the scars through his clothes with a far better eye for the blemishes than Crawford would have*. Instead Will knew that Hannibal was looking back through them, tracing patterns of the past to try and recapture what had been there; knowing that it was possible purely because he wished to believe it so.

“You do not want to offer me the past.”

“How about the future?”

Sharp eyes refocused, accompanied by a long intake of breath. Hannibal took Will’s glass and set it down on the counter. He gathered Will close and closed his eyes as his embrace was returned.

“It is impossible to preserve entropy,” Hannibal said softly, “it merely descends into disorder.”

“Should suit you.”

“I find myself...” he leaned back, looking down, “in the market for forgiveness.”

Will let out a derisive laugh and stepped away, reaching for a towel to clean up the mess on the floor.

“No, I remember your forgiveness Hannibal. All too well. How you forgive is indicative of how you learned to love. I’m not sure either of us has the right or the ability to forgive.”

“My...” Hannibal stopped to take a short breath, “my sister taught me everything I needed to know, almost beyond my conscious ability to control or predict,” Will watched him brazenly, “or negotiate. What you make me feel...it is not dissimilar.”

“A force of mind and circumstance?” he asked, standing.

“Love,” Hannibal clarified.

“It pays you a visit, or it doesn’t.”

“Same with forgiveness.”

“I could argue the same with betrayal.”

“We can all betray.”

Dangerous territory. Will dropped the sopping towel into the sink and wished his world could come together again. *The teacup reshaping itself, picking up pieces of them as it travelled, pulling their world back into flawless order*. But it could not.

The cracks always showed. Enough that he couldn’t look at them.

“You’ll need better shoes,” Will said incongruously as he took his coat off the rack by the back door, making Hannibal tip his head, “or you’ll get soaked.”

Outside, Eleanor was trying to jump up on a bemused Angel as the lumbering Bernese panted, her fur dotted with white. In his coat and wellingtons, Will ran over and picked her up, making her squeal and giggle.

“Urgh, little girls should look out in the snow,” he growled dramatically as she flailed, “for big snow trolls like little girls for dinner. We have big, yellow teeth, and sneaky, sneaky arms.”

“You haven’t no yellow teef,” she said waving her arms at the dogs, “you-you-you brush-ed them!”

“Brush my teeth?” Will said incredulously as he hiked her up, cradling her with her legs over his arm, kicking, “Trolls don’t brush their teeth! We like filthy and grungy and mucky. Something tells me you need to learn our ways. In the muck with you!”

She laughed and half heartedly fought him as he waded over to one of the larger drifts and, holding her tight, dropped them both inside. They disappeared with a *whumf*. Encased in the insulating crystals, where their laughter echoed back at them, dulled down as if they were deep underground. As they lay together, Eleanor twisted round and managed to put a handful of snow on Will’s forehead and rub it in.

“Ah, you see? You make a good troll!” he said, tickling her.

The light from above was overshadowed. When Will looked back up he wasn’t sure what to expect. Then...

“I was just passing, on my white steed,” Hannibal said as, to the left of the hole, Henry the white American pitbull cross appeared, tongue lolling, “when I heard the cries of a fair maiden. It appears, my good lady, that you have been captured by an evil troll. May I offer any assistance?”

“I’m bein’ taught to be a troll!” she said gleefully.

“Oh? Well that sounds wonderful, only I was sure you would make a most splendid princess. You see, I am a king from a nearby land, and I have no daughter to succeed me. Would you like to come and live in my castle?”

“In a castle? Do you have flyin’ unicorns there?” she asked seriously enough to make Will snort.

“We have chocolate fountains and marshmallow beds. Here, my lady,” he reached down and offered his hand; when Eleanor took it, Will couldn’t help but feel his world stick in his throat. *Hands so soaked in blood, touching those he never wished to see stained.*

Are yours so different? He asked himself. He couldn’t answer for fear of the consequences.

“But alas, the poor troll will surely die here in this hole, all alone,” Hannibal, with Elle at his side, looked down at Will, “should we take him home with us?”

“Uh huh, he’s a nice troll. Come on daddy we gonna go eat my bed!”

The hand reached down for him. Will looked at it, a twitch at his eye. The itch in his left hand wriggled like ants. His breath hitched. *No one said this would be simple.* When he took the hand and allowed himself to be pulled up, Will imagined he could feel the years surrounding them like the thick, muting layer of snow. Encapsulated.

“You see, he’s not a troll at all,” Hannibal said to Elle, “but a cursed prince.”

“A curse?” Elle asked dramatically, “B-but how do you save him?”

“Maybe I'm happy the way I am,” Will said seriously.

“How do you know,” he was asked, “if you’ve never tried it?”

He blinked rapidly at the implication. *Because of all the things Hannibal was insinuating through his use of the impersonal pronoun, Will was sure he’d tried them all.*

“Y-you should kiss him,” Elle said, pointing wildly, “that’s what the prince did in my book, and-and it made Snow White all better again after the witch po-poisened her.”

“A good idea, my lady,” Hannibal said, touching her hair.

Everything he’d ever wanted, as Hannibal leaned forwards to place a chaste kiss to his lightly chapped lips, but pasted over the cracks that *showed through.* The past still ripped at the seams, even as he tried to rationalise it.

“There!” Hannibal said, taking Will by the shoulders, “What a fine prince he is. Shall we take my proud horse back to the castle and eat until we are full?

“Yes, yes!” Elle said, jumping up to tug at Henry’s collar as the dog’s tail wagged and he barked happily, “Come on horsey, we’re gonna eat till we’re full.”

Watching her trot back towards the house was a strange experience. The innocence in Eleanor allowed her to see Hannibal as Will once had. He wondered, not for the first time, if she would hate him when she was older for not telling her the truth. Instead he looked Hannibal in the eye and asked him seriously,

“Do you love her?”

It was simple for him to tell when the man lied if Will was actively watching for the agency of the lie. Staring at each other, Hannibal spoke clearly.

“I have loved you both since we were parted. For me, we have been a family together in the rooms of my palace for longer than time permits. I only wish I could tell you how much you all meant to me then. How much you still do.”

“Maybe you can’t. Because I don’t think I could believe it even if you did.”

A short pause, in which Hannibal inclined his head down, “Trust must be earned.”

“Did it take all of your expensive degrees to figure that one out?” Will said sarcastically, “Come on, you have the disappointment of explaining why marshmallow beds don’t exist to make up for. Although presents haven’t been opened yet. I’m sure that’ll be a good enough distraction.”

Watching them together was a tricky operation. Part of him wished to scoop her up and run. The other was simply fascinated by the instant connection they had formed.

Will sat on the couch, his feet tucked up and knees bent to the side, head resting on a pillow as Hannibal sat on the floor with Eleanor before the tree and helped her open her gifts.

“What *is* it?” she asked as she tried her best to pick up the large, slightly torn box.

“Ah, it is for drawing I presume?” Hannibal looked to Will.

“It’s Spirograph, Hannibal.”

“You must love to draw,” he said to Eleanor.

“Uh huh. I drew a picture of me and the dogs and Charlotte at the beach and daddy put it on the wall.”

“Would you draw one for me, my little sparrow?”

“*Su*re,” she said, the first part of the word high pitched as she tried her best to get inside the box, “can I play wif it now? I need my pencils.”

“Don’t you want to open your others first?” Will asked.

By the time she put her hands on Hannibal’s gift, Will was almost asleep. He watched her as she unwrapped it determinedly, tongue tucked at the side of her mouth. Eventually a clear

plastic tape emerged, with a label written in familiar cursive.

“A little bird told me you like music,” Hannibal said as Eleanor looked at the tape happily, “these are some of my favourites. I thought you might like to listen to them.”

“What do you say, Ellie?” Will said.

“Thank you,” she said dutifully, even as she pushed up onto her feet, holding up the tape for her father as she toddled closer, “can I?”

“Of course you can. Hannibal, there’s a tape player in the kitchen, could you bring it through?”

They sat together, the sound of Tchaikovsky floating delicately through the room, as Eleanor sat on the floor and drew complex patterns with her Spirograph set with the dogs clustered around the fire for warmth. Will curled into Hannibal’s side, and was held gently in return.

“You do not wish to open your present?”

“Maybe later,” Will answered slowly, taking a deep breath through his nose.

“A little early to be so tired,” Hannibal commented.

“I...” Will stopped to yawn, “...I didn’t take my meds this morning. Coming off Salpol makes me lethargic.”

“I see. Was that a recommended departure from doctor’s orders?”

“I didn’t think I’d need it,” Will said as he breathed in deeply and kissed at Hannibal’s clavicle, “not today.”

Dinner was a succulent feast of slow cooked meat, roasted vegetables and a feeling of completion. Will spent moments of the meal checking the clock to make sure he wasn’t trapped in a dream. A fear that he would wake up alone in the dark was a constant threat.

Instead he was able to watch Hannibal fish out the wishbone from the chicken carcass and pull it with Eleanor. She won the game, and was told *make a wish.* Will wanted to know what she was praying for as she scrunched her eyes shut tight and pursed her lips.

“Done it,” she said as she gave him back the bone, “can I have some pudding now?”

The night wore on until Eleanor was nodding off at every word Hannibal spoke. They had taken it in turn to tell stories, *of fairies and monsters and explorers and fantastical lands*, some too close to home for comfort. Hannibal’s attempts matched up wonderfully with real life events, somewhat censored for younger ears.

Enough that, for Will, it confirmed Hannibal’s need to always express himself through a veil of semi-truth. The important parts of his life were seen as fairy tales, made true only by the collective remembrance of those involved.

Will thought of the goblins and the mountain and the eaten children, leaving him with more questions than answers; ones he didn't particularly want.

A mere door between them was too little for comfort, and the room Crawford had used was still made. Will went about lighting the fire as he heard the door close behind him, Eleanor safely asleep down the hall.

"So," he said as the flames caught the paper and twigs, licking higher, "are you going to make this complicated or not?"

"I believe I was once informed you preferred complications," Hannibal said as he approached.

"I did, once. Until I realised what you considered complex."

Standing let the heat leave his face and the shadow of the unlit room swallow him. Will felt hands against his sides, fingers slipping across his abdomen. His muscles bunched, even as he put his hands over those clasped upon his stomach. *Steady breathing at his neck*; though now the phantom was real.

"This always goes better if I'm perfectly honest with you."

"What would be the point, otherwise?" Will asked, "One of us has to be honest."

"I am honest."

"Not perfectly."

"As honest as anyone."

"Not really," Will said as he leaned back and relaxed, "I've had conversations with you, there were times we spent together that I felt I understood you...but somehow I always knew I was speaking to someone else, and just hoping that the real you was getting what he needed from it all."

"Then you believe me to be a well tailored lie?"

"I respect its meticulous construction," Will said as he turned in the hold until they were facing each other, hands overlapping at the base of his spine; Hannibal was watching him closely, "you wear it so casually, enough that most have only ever seen you through that human veil. You keep it over your eyes, to stop others getting in."

Will reached up to touch the skin of Hannibal's cheek, "Sometimes, I feel as if I've been there, beyond that veil. At times, I've felt as if I've been you, as if we were...blurring together. And I would forget who should be mourning who."

"You always were difficult to pin down," Hannibal said, eyes flicking to the right, "Did you bring wine?"

Looking to his left, Will inspected at the half empty bottle with its cork askew in the neck, the clean glass next to it almost invisible in the dark. He put his hands on Hannibal's hips and shook his head softly.

"No, no. That must be the last of what Jack wasn't able to swallow."

"Jack Crawford," Hannibal said the name with the surety of a school teacher, enough that Will knew Hannibal wasn't surprised at the admission Jack had been here as a guest, "he has gotten your hands very dirty."

"I wasn't forced back into the field."

"I wouldn't say 'forced'," Hannibal shrugged lightly, "manipulated would be the word I'd choose."

"Interesting choice," Will said, "does it come to mind easily, that word? Or do you just enjoy the irony?"

"I never manipulated you, Will."

Will's laugh was bitter but bizarrely genuine. *The hurt came from a place he didn't want to think existed: the place that understood.* Will pulled back from the loose hold and turned away, undoing the buttons on his shirt, opening his flesh to the air.

"No," he agreed, "you didn't. You didn't want to sculpt me, you wanted to nurture. I...remember all the times I should have seen what you were through what you tried to bring out in me, but instead I chose to be blind."

"Even the blind man sees, just with different senses," Hannibal said as Will dropped his shirt to the floor and undid his trousers, slipping out of them, "Perhaps you were not blind. Perhaps you chose to accept what your eyes could not see."

Hannibal was not one to pass over an opportunity to make a person confront themselves. There was a want there, a need to see the mirror in Will that he tried his best to keep under cloth. The air was cold enough to have the goose flesh rise on his arms, down across the back of his thighs and his legs. Turning back to the light, he found Hannibal's insatiable eyes on him.

Two careful steps forwards and Will cupped Hannibal's face before placing a soft kiss to his lips.

"If I asked you to look after me tonight, would you do it?"

"Do we have different ideas of what constitutes looking after?"

"I don't think so."

"Then allow me to peruse you," Hannibal said, sliding his warm hands up across Will's chill back, "as I once had the right to."

The sheets were cold. Will shivered as he lay on his back while Hannibal undressed. The inspection began at his right thigh, at the pale, shiny dimple of the years old bullet wound. Lips caressed the flesh, even as they spoke.

“Would it have been different, if it had been yourself and not another? I do not think I could have kept you from myself forever. Jack pulled back the veil with both hands,” Hannibal worked his way up, past the tuft of curls by his cock, towards the long dip across his pelvis with its faint pink valley; a gentle hand delved in, running carefully across the c-section scar, “If you had found me with both eyes open, Will, what would you have done?”

“I think the question is more,” Will said, his hand tracing fingers through Hannibal’s hair, and Hannibal’s hand wondered further to the purplish stretch marks at the right side of his abdomen, “what you would have done.”

Without hesitation, Hannibal spoke, “I would have asked you to come with me.”

Without hesitation, Will answered, “Then I would have gone with you.”

Hannibal had moved on, to the jagged knife scar at his side; the wound Lecter himself had closed with skilled hands. Will jumped involuntarily as the old wound was nuzzled and the flesh nipped.

“Life is rarely that simple. Instead, it is complex, as you so love. Hindsight allows us the chance to say we would have wished for, and not what we would have done.”

“You like to think I don’t love you,” Will said, frowning lightly as Hannibal crawled higher, to the scars at his chest, “it makes it easier for you to understand why I left you there, is that it?”

“I know that you love me, darling,” said before the first kiss, pressed against the point where the blades had met, “or by now you would have killed me yourself.”

Will closed his eyes and swallowed, feeling his chest swell as he breathed in, while Hannibal ran his tongue along the right hand scar as if to taste the memory of blood. *To lift the knife and feel the blood flow freely, to know that the years of hate could culminate in something so horrifyingly pure, to know that Hannibal could be vindicated even as he died from the attempt*. He opened his eyes and let the breath go.

“I don’t think I could.”

“No? I’m sure there would be certain motivations," Hannibal said, running gentle touch over the scar at Will's throat, then down to the craterous scar at his right shoulder, *the one answered on Hannibal's own body like a mirror,* "Everyone has a push point. Yours is surely the little angel sleeping in the next room,” Will tensed and Hannibal, now level with him, looked into his eyes, “you need not fear. I would not hurt her even if my life depended on it.”

“Not even knowing I’d kill you if you tried?” Will asked.

“Not even that,” Hannibal said, “beautiful as it would be to see you try.”

“I thought you were going to take care of me tonight?” Will asked, voice strained.

“Of course, darling. Forgive me. My abstinence from you has made me greedy. Hedonic adaption is alive and well, and it seems the chocolate is sweeter for the waiting after all.”

The kiss was soft and sweet, as if to wipe away the time spanning between them. *His days alone wishing for the life he’d lost: his days alone, living with his family inside his skull*. Will allowed Hannibal the control, opening his mouth when a curious tongue prodded for entrance. As the man he loved climbed atop him, Will opened his legs without thinking, the dampness between his thighs apparent as his skin came into contact with the cold air.

“Uh, no, wait,” Will murmured as Hannibal made to position himself, “just a little...” he took Hannibal’s right hand and pressed it down between his legs.

“A little preparation, dearest?” he was asked as a middle finger slid in deep, past the knuckle and Will felt his world catch fire.

“Mmm,” he squirmed, panting, “it’s been...been a while and...and I...haven’t had anyone else like you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Hannibal said as he added another two fingers, pushing quickly as he laved Will’s throat, “and a placation.”

“It was something I had to get used to,” Will said, reaching down to take hold of Hannibal’s long, fully erect cock, stroking the silky skin.

“More?”

“Please,” he breathed; *another finger was added, stretching him open,* “god, yes, *fuck*.”

“It is difficult not to reciprocate. In my time at the Asylum, I would walk through our life together, alive in the memory of us, dead in the moment that they took you from me. This,” Hannibal scissored the digits within him, making Will groan loudly as his body convulsed, pulling at the hair above Hannibal’s nape, “is not something that could be catered for by simple imagination. Are you ready, darling?”

“Mm hmm,” Will nodded and closed his eyes, humming desperately as he panted through his nose; the weight atop him intensified and he brought his knees up and out, heels finding the backs of thighs and digging in. When Hannibal pushed inside Will couldn’t help but tense, stalling the completion, “oh *god*.”

“Am I hurting you?” he was asked in a voice that struggled to remain demure.

“No,” Will choked out, panting in a rasp, “yes. I mean...*fuck* please, just keep going.”

“Will...”

“Don’t *stop!*”

He was obeyed, and the flaring burn as he was pushed open intensified. Will could feel his legs shaking, the muscles at his sides jumped and his body sang in a voice that reached the heavens.

Right, right, right.

Everything was right, even as everything was wrong. Fully sheathed, Hannibal pressed his lips to Will's ear, breathing it hot and wet.

"Give yourself to me and I will take care of you," Hannibal said; Will nodded as much as he could and managed to raise his shaking legs to lock his ankles behind Hannibal's buttocks, his arms behind his neck.

The world shifted as Hannibal sat back and lifted Will into his lap. Gravity played its part and Will, curled tightly around him, slid deeper. His breathing became erratic and his ankles slipped, letting his legs splay. Hannibal held him close and Will was unable to stop the sharp cry as the swollen knot at the base of Hannibal's cock was pushed inside.

"Unh, please, *please*," Will pleaded mindlessly, delirious with the pain and pleasure of it, fingers twitching at Hannibal's back, "mmmh, I..no, can't...*mmmh*."

"My darling one, my dearest Will," Hannibal breathed into the pale curve of Will's throat.

The world seemed to dim, pulling the shadows closer. Soon it was only them, draped in a pool of flickering light and sensation, enough to make Will believe nothing else existed beyond that void. That they were alone together.

They blurred together in the dark, log and twig snapped with a switch of sound to give the movements energy in their ecstasy. *Crack, spark, bend, glow*. Writhing in lambent glory, enough to resemble the flashing fast life of the flames they mimicked.

It was every moment his body had yearned for, every transgressed touch that had been placed against his skin wiped clean, making do with the scent of another even as his core itched with the thought now overridden by the effusive perfume of his lover. Now it was all as nothing.

Inside, he heard himself whisper the plea as he rose and fell, *please*.

Waking was an odd displacement of time and space. His body remembered being upright, embraced tightly, mindless with desire. Now he lay heavy and exhausted, head pillowed against a hot shoulder, his leaden arm draped over sweat dampened whorls of hair on a broad chest.

Will blinked slowly and didn't even attempt to move. Out the corner of his eye he could see Hannibal's hand lift the glass which he'd had placed on his chest, stem caught between his fingers. His Adam's apple bobbed as he drank and Will wasn't sure what to think. Part of him hated what he had done, and the other felt a jolt of triumph for achieving his deception.

"Hannibal," he managed softly.

"Yes, darling?"

“Thank you.”

“You need never thank me,” he was told, “would you like some wine?”

“No, no I’m fine,” his triumphant side couldn’t help but add, “It’ll knock me right out.”

As the sweat cooled and the afterglow burned down, Will shifted closer for warmth. Hannibal wrapped a strong arm around his back and pulled the duvet higher over Will’s shoulders. When he looked up, Will found Hannibal’s glass almost empty. He reached over and snagged the bottle, refilling the glass awkwardly before putting the empty down onto the ground.

“It’s the last of the two thousand and nine vintage. Best not waste it.”

“A good year.”

“Yes, it was. Alana’s party, Christ. You were the only thing there worth going for. Do you know I almost didn’t go? Jack forced me. It wasn’t that long after he’d pulled me in on the Ripper case and he knew I was flagging. He told me it would be good for morale.”

“Then it seems I do have something to thank Jack Crawford for.”

“Maybe we both do. Hannibal?”

“Yes?” he was asked through a covered yawn.

“Tell me about Mischa.”

A soft pause, during which Hannibal took another drink.

“What do you want to know?”

“No, that’s not it. Tell me about her, Hannibal. I want *you* to tell me about her.”

“I see.”

It was not often that he heard Hannibal hesitant, though even then he was not hesitant in the way others were. *Always careful, always calculating, except when Will found a way through*. Will traced gentle patterns with his fingers on Hannibal’s right pectoral, watching the hair shift and tangle with each pull.

When Hannibal spoke next, it was almost a surprise.

“She was...” a pause, “all that was good in me. I remember she used to laugh at the smallest of things. When mother played, she would dance. Sometimes we danced together. Always happy, even if we fought; a kiss against my hand and *atsiprašau* and all was well again. No feeling has ever been so simple since she was taken from me.”

“Who took her?” Will could feel the anger in him, but was unsure if it was wholly his own.

“Deserters and looters, all starving and vicious. They must have found the vast grounds an inviting place to hide. At the very least,” Hannibal took another drink, “they did not force me to watch.”

“Did you kill them?” Will asked.

“Yes. Later, when I better understood how to hunt. Some died quickly. I was not so experienced in my early days. Gruntas, his name was, the first of the litter; roaring, disgusting pig of a man. The one who made me eat...” a pause, “Those I found later surely would have wished I’d found them sooner.”

Will curled closer and asked, “The longest?”

“Two and a half weeks. It is amazing what a medical degree can teach about sustaining life while simultaneously taking it.”

“I’m glad,” the words were laced with strict venom.

“You are?”

“Yes.”

“Darling,” Will felt a clumsy kiss against his hair and knew it would not be long, “my darling.”

Will wished he could force the hands of the clock to stop, to slow until they stood at standstill and left their moment suspended. In a blinding flash of regret, Will wished he had not done it, even though he knew he needed to.

“Did you call her..?” Will stopped and swallowed before continuing, “did you call her sparrow?”

“...I did. Though I do not remember telling you that.”

“Earlier, you called Eleanor sparrow and I...I thought I saw it in you. That same spark whenever you’d mention your sister.”

“It is not as simple as you tell it.”

“Yes,” Will said as he pushed up, looking down at Hannibal’s half lidded eyes, “maybe you’re right.”

“You wish to pity me?” Hannibal looked calmly angry, “Is that what this was for? Do you wish to tear the veil in two or burn it off altogether?”

“No,” Will shook his head even as the other man blinked blearily, opening and closing his mouth as if to feel the numbness in his lips, “we don’t pity each other. It’s what allows us to understand. You do, don’t you? That there is no substitute? We can’t replace her, Hannibal.”

“The wine,” Hannibal laughed as his eyes shone in understanding, showing his canines, his movements sluggish, “oh my darling, so cunning, so sharp. I am dulled to your will, how foolish of me.”

“You died out there didn’t you? In the snow trying to save your sister. Your heart died with her, and now they don’t have a word for what you’ve become. But I don’t...” Will sat up, feeling a shaky hand at his back as it succumbed to the drugged wine; he looked down over his shoulder as Hannibal struggled to retain consciousness, “I don’t need a word, Hannibal, you understand that? Tell me you do.”

“They made me eat her, like a party trick,” Hannibal’s words were slurred, even as his smile grimaced, “slurp her up in a soup with starving lips. Does the world understand such cruelty? I do...I understand, and I know you do Will. Made to carry her for months dead inside you, giving life even as they tore your insides out. Left alone and dying while those responsible espoused sentiments and told others they wished it could have been different. We know what it means to be under cruelty’s thumb, Will.”

“I do. Only I don’t want to be there anymore,” he said, standing cold and naked from the bed; Hannibal tried to follow, but his body was too far shut down, “and I don’t want Eleanor to ever understand what that means. Mischa, she lives on in you Hannibal. You are her vessel. We...we’re your family,” Will turned and looked down at him, lit by the yellow firelight, “I know I’ll see you again. You’ll find us when you’re ready.”

“Will...”

“I love you, Hannibal.”

Eyes closed and mouth slackened. The hand and arm that had been searching for him, almost blindly, dropped down over the bed’s edge and dangled there like a broken tree branch. Kneeling down on the hard floorboards, Will took the hand in his and kissed it gently. Then he tucked it back into the bed and pushed Hannibal onto his side. The duvet was set neatly up around his throat.

Will leaned down and kissed his cheek, breathing in deeply as the dark perfume sagged down into his lungs. He held the breath for as long as he could stand it before it rushed out in a puff of slightly milky air.

In the bathroom he slid on his slippers and washed himself down with a cold, wet cloth. Dressing was acrimonious, especially as his body wanted nothing more than to slip back into the warm bed and curl close to its mate. Instead he found himself in the sitting room, packing Eleanor’s presents away into the last of the duffel bags with space.

When he found his present from Hannibal, still wrapped under the tree, Will looked at it carefully. *A small cube, wrapped in brown paper and string*. He took it back to the bedroom and placed it gently on the empty pillow behind Hannibal, with a quick note.

For next time.

Once he'd packed up enough food to do them for the next day, and everything he needed from the medicine cabinet, it all went in the car outside. He hooked up the trailer, difficult through his gloves, and jiggled on his feet to get the blood flowing.

The house seemed cold and empty when he came back inside, dragging snowy footsteps with him. Eleanor's door squeaked open as he entered.

"Hey kiddo," he said to sleepy eyes, "you ready?"

"It's dark," she said as she sat up.

"I know, but we need to get going. I've got all your stuff packed. Have I missed anything?"

He lifted her down and they did a quick scan of the room while Will dressed her in her warm clothes and jacket, a thick hat pulled down over her curls.

"What abou' your friend?" she asked seriously.

"He's going to stay here for a while," Will said vaguely, pulling his gloves back on.

"Oh, ok. He was nice. I drew him a picture," she looked around her, "but I donno where I put it."

Will felt his chest tighten and reached down to rub at her back, "That's alright. You can draw him a new one next time we see him."

"Can I keep my music?" she asked, picking up the tape Hannibal had given her.

"Sure you can, sweetheart. Do you want to listen to it just now?"

"Yeah," she said sleepily.

He bundled her into the car, headphones on, and set the engine running to let it heat up while he checked the trailer was secure. The back seats and the boot were stuffed full of everything they'd brought, all slotted in like badly placed Tetris blocks.

"Come on you lot," Will whistled tightly and the paws came scampering, "in we go."

The dogs recognised the open doors of the trailer, jumping in two at a time, scrabbling for purchase. Only Buster refused.

"We have to go," Will said, hunching down beside the small dog, reaching out to scratch behind his ear; Buster let out a content groan and closed his eyes, "you don't want to go in the back, that it? Ok."

He was picked up and put in the foot space in front of Eleanor's seat. The little girl was already fast asleep by the time Will got himself behind the wheel and fired up the fan heater. Buster curled up on the mat and put his head between his paws.

Reversing was tricky with the trailer in the dark and on the sluggish snow, but he managed it. When he pulled out, the house came into view. One lone window, down in the East wing, still flickered with the last of the firelight. He opened his mouth, but the words found themselves stuck.

The gingerbread house sat before him, like a sweet trap. He knew they both had to leave it behind, or nothing would change.

His mouth closed. There was nothing to say that could not be said at their next meeting. Will put the car in first gear and turned long and slow over the hidden driveway. The car found its wheels on the road, leaving long, shallow tracks behind them like breadcrumbs.

He knew Hannibal would find his way back from the gingerbread house, from the place where the past lived. Will couldn't help but leave crumbs behind, to make sure Hannibal found his way back home.

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Chapter End Notes

Will and Eric's first conversation:
“Ah, désolé! Ça va?” - "Ah, I'm sorry. Are you alright?"
"Ou-Oui, ça va" - "I'm fine."
"je parle un peu français" - "I speak a little French"

Will and Eric's second conversation:
"Ca t'amuse de m'emballer?" - "Are you just stringing me along?"
"Je ne t'ai pas demandé de m'embrasser" - "I didn't mean for this to happen."
"Laisse tomber!" - "Forget it!"
“Je t'emmerde" - "Fuck you"

Associated Works

Dear All,

I just wanted to put a link here to the wondeful Dr_Fumbles_McStupid who is a talented, amazing dramatist and has chosen my crazy fic to do a podfic on. The link to the first chapter is below and I was really blown away, it is very, very good and really brings this work to life. I had not even heard of a podfic before they asked me if it was ok to use this fic, and now I am hooked:

https://archiveofourown.org/chapters/128736775?show_comments=true&view_full_work=false#comment_702879628

I hope you all have a great time listening, it's perfect if you want some radio drama murder thriller Hannigram in your life. And please go and give Dr_Fumbles_McStupid some love as they are amazing and have an extensive library of podifcs to choose from.

Thanks and all the best

Maiko

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!